

Research on the Symbolic Value of Nuo Masks in the Context of Contemporary Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation*

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The Nuo mask is the core visual vehicle within China's Nuo culture and constitutes a complex symbolic system through facial features (icons), patterns (indexes), and colors (symbols). Within the context of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation, its value lies in the continuation and revitalization of its dynamic symbolic functions. Grounded in semiotic theory, this paper elaborates on three core dimensions of symbolic value manifested by Nuo masks in ICH preservation: a ritual symbol for living transmission, a symbol of identity for collective memory, and an aesthetic symbol as a source of creativity.

Keywords: Nuo masks, intangible cultural heritage preservation, symbolic value, sense of community for the Chinese nation, cultural innovation

Introduction

Nuo culture is a living heritage in China. As the most crucial visual representation of Nuo rituals and opera, the Nuo mask is a sophisticated visual symbolic system. Existing research from a semiotic perspective has clarified how Nuo masks encode the deep-seated Chinese culture through their triadic structure of icons, indexes, and symbols. (e.g., Liu, 2022).

With Nuo culture incorporated into the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation system in China, the conservation of Nuo masks is undergoing a transition from salvage documentation to creative transformation. However, current preservation efforts often emphasize collection and recording, while neglecting their composite value, so how to ensure the transition from salvage documentation to creative transformation to be effectively guided has become a core issue.

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Building upon existing semiotic interpretations, this paper focuses on the practical field of preservation to analyze the threefold symbolic value inherent in Nuo masks and propose corresponding preservation and revitalization strategies.

As a Ritual Symbol for Living Transmission: Sustaining Community Cultural Memory and Identity

Core Value: Meaning Generation in Dynamic Rituals

The fundamental value of the Nuo mask lies in its role as a core mediating symbol within ritual practices (e.g., Liao & Liu, 2022). The complete realization of its meaning unfolds throughout the entire process of “donning the mask—embodying the deity—performing the ritual”. The semiotic essence of this process is that the performer transforms from an ordinary person into a vessel of divinity through the mask’s iconic function (simulating the deity’s appearance).

Implications for ICH Preservation

Based on this, the preservation of its living nature should be the primary principle. Specific approaches include:

1. Holistic preservation, continuation of symbolic context: The focus of preservation must shift to support the holistic cultural practices. This requires to preserve the ritual spaces (e.g., Nuo altars) and festival cycles, to safeguard the complete ritual chain from inviting the deities, performing as deities, to sending off the deities. For instance, to preserve the Maonan Nuo (Feitao Rite) of the Maonan people in Guangxi, it is a must to focus on using masks in key segments like inviting the deities, performing as deities, and sending off the deities.

2. Strengthening the central role of bearers: Mask carvers and Nuo opera performers are the senders, interpreters, and activators of this symbolic system. The intangible image of the deity in their minds and their tangible carving skills are crucial for ensuring the accuracy and effectiveness of the symbolic coding. Their insistence on discarding unqualified masks is the cultural consciousness to accurately convey the symbolic meaning. Therefore, preservation efforts need to systematically support the transmission of their skills and oral formulae (e.g., “a young general’s eyebrow like an arrow, a female general’s eyebrow like a line”).

3. Stimulating community participation, achieving co-creation of meaning: The audience of the rituals are both receivers of the symbols and co-creators of meaning. Through immersive viewing, they interpret the mask symbols within a shared cultural-psychological framework, thereby consolidating and regenerating shared beliefs and historical memories. Therefore, encouraging the participation of community members, especially the younger generation, is fundamental to maintain the social vitality of this symbolic system.

As a Symbol of Identity for Collective Memory: A Visualized Vehicle for Consolidating the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation

Core Value: Unified Encoding of Historical Narrative and Identity

The Nuo mask is a systematic historical archive and identity encoding. From Fangxiangshi’s “golden four eyes” (visual symbols representing the “center-four directions” worldview), to the shared evolutionary pattern of “animal face → semi-human/semi-beast → human face” across various ethnic groups, to the cross-regional five-color system connected to Five Directions and Five Virtues, Nuo masks encode a highly unified cultural logic in

China, demonstrating that through long historical practice, the various ethnic groups of China have formed a shared symbolic signifying system and worldview (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The conventional relationship between traditional Chinese color concepts and Nuo mask coloration.

Note. Drawn by the author.

Implications for ICH Preservation

This dimension of value demands that preservation efforts should be built on the foundation of decoding cultural genes and fostering dialogue:

1. Deepening interpretation: From “Spectacle Display” to “Gene Decoding”: In museum exhibitions and cultural dissemination, semiotic tools should be employed to interpret the shared Chinese cultural genes behind their shapes, patterns, and colors. For example, the fangs and animal horns of the “Mountain-Opening Fierce General” represent the shared historical memory of the Chinese ancestors in struggling against nature; the red-faced “Guan Gong” is deeply rooted in the collective cultural psychology of regarding red as the virtue of loyalty.

2. Promoting dialogue: Building platforms for “Diversity” within the framework of “Unity”: Through digital comparison projects involving Nuo masks from different regions and ethnic groups in China, the diversity and unity within Chinese culture can be visually presented. For instance, when viewing the animal masks of Tibet’s Cham dance and the righteous deity masks of the Maonan’s “Feitao Rite”, the public discover that they follow common evolutionary logic from natural totems to personalized deities with the symbolic norms of the five-color system, thus promoting intercultural dialogue among ethnic groups.

3. Serving the present: Activating the modern cohesive power of historical symbols: As a symbolic crystallization of the community consciousness in history, the Nuo mask provides evidence for consolidating the

sense of community for the Chinese nation today. Preserving and revitalizing Nuo culture means reactivating the cohesive function of this ancient symbolic system in the context of the new era.

As an Aesthetic Symbol and a Source of Creativity: Driving Cultural Innovation and Industrial Transformation

Core Value: A Systematic Database of Aesthetic Symbols

The Nuo mask is a database of aesthetic symbols and a cultural gene pool. Its value is rooted in its complete symbolic system: The “icons” of facial features provide rich character archetypes; the “indexes” of pattern composition are linked to mythology and legends; the “symbols” governing color carry the symbolic system of traditional Chinese color philosophy. Together, these constitute a unique and self-consistent source of creativity, providing nourishment for contemporary cultural innovation.

Implications for ICH Preservation

Unearthing this value points towards innovative development paths for ICH preservation:

1. Design transformation: Systematic translation from “Symbolic Elements” to “Modern Vocabulary”: The ICH Preservation of Nuo masks need to encourage creative design. For example, extracting the cosmological structure of “center-four directions” from the “golden four eyes” can be translated into architectural, spatial, or logo designs; abstracting and geometrizing elements like the “fangs” and “flaming eyebrows” of fierce deity masks can create contemporary fashion symbols.

2. Narrative development: Activating the contemporary narrative potential of “Mythological IP”: The vast pantheon and story network behind the Nuo masks are cultural IPs with great development potential. Preservation efforts can transform the elements of Nuo masks to a source for games, films, and other works. For instance, the Nuo mask of ferocious deity in Black Myth, Wukong is a top-grade armor, and when the protagonist wears a Nuo mask, it symbolizes his mission is to drive away demons and save the world.

3. Cross-media dissemination: Expanding the boundaries of “Immersive” and “Digital” experiences: Digital technology can be utilized to break through the spatiotemporal limitations in preservation and dissemination: establish permanent digital archives through high-precision 3D scanning and modeling, creating online digital museums; use VR/AR, holographic technology to restore or construct Nuo ritual scenes, allowing the public to immersively experience the symbolic generation process.

Conclusion: From “Preserving Symbols” to “Activating Value”

In summary, Nuo masks present three interconnected dimensions of symbolic value in contemporary ICH preservation: the foundation as living ritual symbols emphasizing the preservation of cultural practice contexts; the core serving as a mediating symbol within ritual practices; the pathway as aesthetic and creative symbols for creative transformation of excellent traditional culture.

Therefore, preservation of Nuo masks should shift towards the comprehensive activation of their dynamic symbolic functions. This implies that preservation practice must emphasize both “decoding” and “recoding”: It must accurately interpret its ancient symbolic system and meaning through research, documentation, and transmission; while also enabling the reproduction and reconnection of its meaning in the new era through education, dialogue, and innovation.

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