THE TRANSFORMATION OF BLACK TAI TRADITIONAL CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN DINGJIA NÜ DANCE

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how traditional cultural symbols of the Black Tai (Tai Dam) ethnic group are transformed into choreographic language in the folk dance Dingjia Nü. The study has three objectives: first, to identify the core Black Tai cultural symbols embedded in the dance vocabulary; second, to analyze how these static cultural symbols are converted into dynamic bodily gestures, stage formations, and choreographic narrative through processes of extraction, artistic refinement, and reconstruction; and third, to evaluate how this transformation balances the preservation of cultural authenticity with the aesthetic demands of contemporary stage performance. The study adopts a qualitative research approach combining case study, dance ethnography, and semiotic analysis. Data are collected through document study, in-depth interviews with eight key informants, participatory observations, and analysis of performance videos and choreographic notes. Thematic analysis is employed for data processing. The findings reveal that Dingjia Nü successfully transforms Black Tai traditional cultural symbols into contemporary dance expression through a systematic process of identification, transformation, and expression, offering a replicable model for ethnic dance creation that balances authenticity with innovation.
Keywords: Black Tai, Traditional Cultural Symbols, Dingjia Nü Dance, Transformation

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INTRODUCTION

Dingjia Nü is a contemporary folk dance work created in 2018 by the Wenshan Prefecture Ethnic Culture Work Team in Yunnan Province, China (Liu, 2024). Drawing upon the traditional "Jinku Festival" of the Black Tai (Tai Dam) people (Li, P., 2020), the dance centers on the iconic inverted V-shaped headdress worn by Black Tai women: a material symbol that signifies "carrying one's home on the head" and transforms this cultural motif into a stage narrative about homeland, memory, and female resilience (Sun & Ren, 2017).

The Black Tai, an ethnic branch primarily residing in the karst mountain areas of Wenshan, have preserved distinctive cultural traits including terrace rice farming, indigo dyeing and weaving, matrilineal social remnants, and the migration memory of "Dingjia Zou" (walking with home atop the head) (Wang & Liu, 2013). These elements have been passed down through oral traditions, festival rituals, and folk dance practices, yet they have rarely been systematically examined in terms of their transformation into contemporary stage art. While existing scholarship has addressed Black Tai costume, social structure, and festival culture (Li, J., 2016), there remains a notable gap in research on the choreographic mechanism through which Black Tai traditional cultural symbols are converted into dance vocabulary and stage expression (Bai, 2014). This gap limits both the academic understanding of Black Tai dance and the practical development of ethnic dance creation in the region.

This study therefore takes Dingjia Nü as a case study to examine the transformation of Black Tai traditional cultural symbols into choreographic language. The research carries three levels of significance: theoretically, it contributes to dance anthropology and semiotics by revealing the mechanism of symbol transformation in ethnic dance; practically, it offers a replicable model for choreographers and cultural practitioners seeking to balance cultural authenticity with stage artistry; and culturally, it supports the preservation and contemporary transmission of Black Tai intangible heritage by documenting how folk traditions are revitalized through performance.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) Identification and Interpretation of Black Tai Traditional Cultural Symbols

Research on Black Tai cultural symbols has accumulated to a certain extent. Wang and Liu (2013) systematically documented the history, migration routes, and cultural characteristics of the Dai branches in Wenshan, establishing the central position of the "Dingjia Zou" migration memory in Black Tai identity. Li, J. (2016) examined the inheritance of matrilineal remnants and festival customs in contemporary Black Tai society, pointing out that festival rituals such as the Jinku Festival constitute a structural system for Black Tai cultural transmission. Li, P. (2020) analyzed the ritual process of the "Jinku Festival," revealing how migration memory and ancestor worship are encoded as core symbols of Black Tai cultural identity. Together, these studies indicate that the Black Tai cultural symbol system is mainly carried by material culture (headdress, costumes), ritual practice (Jinku Festival), and collective memory (migration history).

2) Extraction and Dynamic Characteristics of Black Tai Dance Movement Symbols

In terms of dance dynamics, Li, Q. (2017) systematically analyzed Black Tai dance and summarized its dynamic characteristics into a twenty-eight-character mnemonic: "feet stepping and hips swinging, opening and closing hands, S-shaped body posture flowing walk, leaning forward and backward with hands raised, upper body straight and upright." This established the origin of the Black Tai dance movement system in rice cultivation and sacrificial rituals. Bai (2014) analyzed the artistic characteristics of Dai dance in Wenshan, highlighting its unique "leaning forward and backward" rhythm added to the "S-shaped three bends," and argued that ethnic dance modernization involves "processing while preserving traditional movement qualities." These studies provide a basis for identifying traditional movement

elements in Dingjia Nü, but there is still a lack of specific analysis of how these elements are selected and transformed in choreographic practice.

3) Transformation Pathways from Traditional Cultural Symbols to Dance Language

In terms of transformation pathways, Sun and Ren (2017) analyzed Black Tai costume culture, particularly the "carrying home on the head" connotation of the human-shaped headdress, providing a basis for understanding how material symbols carry cultural meaning. Liu (2024) explored the "tradition-modernity dialogue" in ethnic folk dance creation. However, existing research has the following obvious deficiencies: first, studies on Black Tai cultural symbols mostly focus on static cultural description, paying less attention to the dynamic transformation of symbols in the choreographic process; second, research on ethnic dance creation mostly remains at the macro-theoretical level, lacking in-depth analysis of the choreographic process of specific works; third, research that combines dance anthropology and semiotic theory to examine Black Tai dance case studies is still lacking. This study precisely addresses these gaps by taking Dingjia Nü as a case study to systematically examine the specific mechanism through which Black Tai traditional cultural symbols are transformed into choreographic language.

4) Conceptual Framework

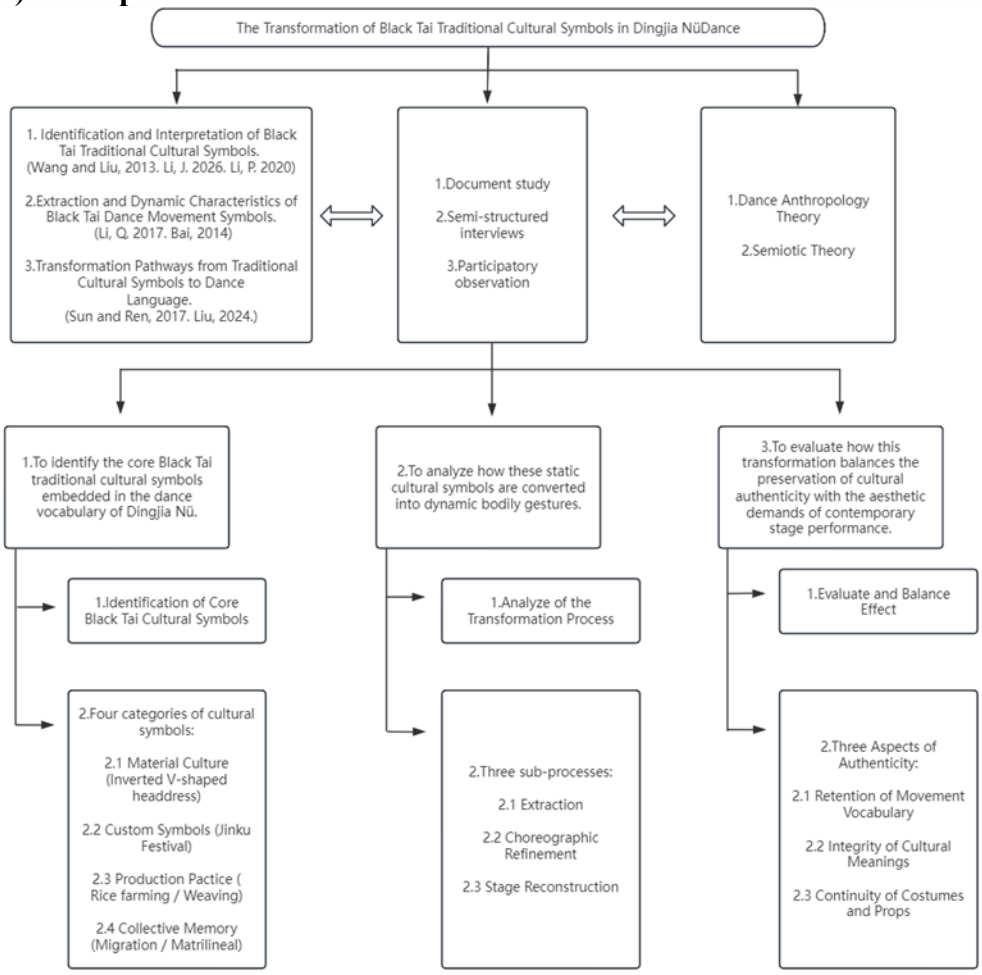


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through document study, semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of performance videos and choreographic notes. Data analysis employed thematic analysis, through which interview transcripts, observation records, and documentary materials were coded, categorized,

and interpreted within the theoretical framework to systematically explain the transformation mechanism of cultural symbols in Dingjia Nü.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1) The Identification of Core Black Tai Cultural Symbols Embedded in the Dance Vocabulary of Dingjia Nü

Through a review of Black Tai cultural literature (Wang & Liu, 2013; Li, J., 2016; Li, P., 2020), combined with analysis of the choreographic notes and performance videos of the dance work, and semi-structured interviews with the chief director and choreographer of Dingjia Nü, four categories of cultural symbols were identified.

The first category is material culture symbols, centered on the inverted V-shaped headdress worn by Black Tai women. This headdress signifies "carrying one's home on the head." In Dingjia Nü, this symbol is expressed through movements such as "raising hands to adjust the hat" and "supporting the home with both hands," as well as through the enlarged headdress as a stage visual focal point. The choreographer stated in an interview: "The headdress was the first core visual element we determined. It is not just decoration; it is a lifelong companion for Black Tai women—from birth to marriage, the headdress is always on the head. We enlarged the headdress so that even the audience in the last row can see this symbol." The black tube skirt and silver ornaments further reinforce the material cultural identity.

The second category is ritual custom symbols, derived from the "Jinku Festival." The dance incorporates ritual elements such as slow walking, palms-together gestures, and circular formations, which are directly traceable to the sacrificial ceremonies of the Black Tai. These movements carry the cultural connotations of ancestor worship, migration memory, and community cohesion. A cultural inheritor mentioned in an interview: "On the day of the Jinku Festival, all the daughters in the village must return. You walk slowly, hands together; this is respect for the ancestors. These movements in the dance have been performed in our village for hundreds of years."



Figure 2 On the Jinku Festival, the married daughter is welcomed home for the holiday in the traditional way.
Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/329390876_667838

The third category is production practice symbols, originating from rice farming and textile labor. "Feet stepping and hips swinging" reflects the stable stance of Black Tai women during terrace rice cultivation; "opening and closing hands" imitates the hand trajectories of sowing grains and weaving cloth. These movements transform daily labor into rhythmic dance vocabulary.

The fourth category is collective memory symbols, encompassing migration history and matrilineal social remnants. The recurring "S-shaped body posture flowing walk" metaphorically represents the continuous marching of Black Tai ancestors during their migration; the choreographic arrangement of female leading and group following reflects the organizational principles of matrilineal society.

2) The Transformation Process from Static Cultural Symbols to Dynamic Dance Language

Through detailed analysis of choreographic notes and rehearsal records, participatory observation at the rehearsal hall of the Wenshan Prefecture Ethnic Culture Work Team, and interviews with the choreographer and lead dancer regarding their creative process and artistic decisions, this section analyzes how the identified static cultural symbols are converted into dynamic dance language through three sub-processes: extraction, choreographic refinement, and stage reconstruction.

The first sub-process is extraction. The choreographers selected the most representative cultural elements from Black Tai tradition, including the inverted V-shaped headdress as the central visual motif, the ritual postures of the "Jinku Festival," and the labor movements of rice farming and weaving. These elements were chosen because they carry the most concentrated cultural meanings and are visually recognizable to both Black Tai community members and external audiences. The choreographer explained in an interview: "We did not put everything Black Tai on stage. We chose the headdress because it is the most obvious symbol of Black Tai women; we chose the weaving hand gestures because that is what they do every day."

The second sub-process is choreographic refinement. The extracted cultural elements were processed through artistic techniques to enhance their stage expressiveness while preserving their cultural essence. For example, the "opening and closing hands" movement from daily weaving was rhythmically structured and its range of motion was expanded. Field notes recorded the rehearsal scene: "The choreographer asked the dancers to first perform the daily weaving movement, then required them to 'amplify this movement three times, but keep the feeling of the hands unchanged.' After repeated adjustments, the final opening and closing hands movement both originated from weaving labor and possessed a clear stage rhythm." The "leaning forward and backward" dynamic, originating from migration journeys, was exaggerated and repeated to strengthen its emotional impact. The "feet stepping and hips swinging" movement was intensified in its rhythmic pulse, making it more visually dynamic while retaining its connection to the stability of rice farming labor.



Figure 3 The scene of a Black Tai woman weaving cloth
Source: Wang Dexiang, Liu Derong, & Bai Hualin, 2010

The third sub-process is stage reconstruction. The refined dance movements were integrated with music, costumes, props, and lighting to create a unified stage image. Traditional instruments such as the "Ding" were combined with modern composition to create a soundscape that balances ethnic flavor with contemporary appeal. The black tube skirt costumes were adapted for stage performance with enhanced silhouettes that facilitate movement visibility, while the inverted V-shaped headdress was enlarged and highlighted through lighting design as the central visual symbol of the entire work.



Figure 4 Pictures of the live performance of the Dingjia Nü
Source: https://www.yipai360.com/photolivepc/?orderId=20260727104907864827

3) The Transformation Balances Cultural Authenticity with Contemporary Stage Artistry

Through synthesis of interview data from all eight key informants (particularly the chief director, costume designer, and cultural inheritors), combined with observation of live performances and video analysis, and thematic analysis of how creative decisions were justified in relation to cultural preservation and artistic innovation, this section evaluates how Dingjia Nü achieves a balance between preserving Black Tai cultural authenticity and meeting the aesthetic demands of contemporary stage performance.

The evaluation finds that the dance maintains cultural authenticity in three key aspects. First, the movement vocabulary retains the core dynamic features of traditional Black Tai dance, including the characteristic "S-shaped" flowing posture, the forward-leaning torso, and the coordination of hip swaying with open-close arm movements. Second, the cultural meanings embedded in the movements such as migration memory, matrilineal social values, and reverence for ancestors remain intact and are communicated to the audience through the performance. Third, the costumes and props preserve traditional Black Tai material culture, including the tube skirt, silver ornaments, and bamboo weaving, ensuring visual cultural continuity.



Figure 5 Dingjia Nü in the traditional Chinese dance, such as leaning forward and backward and raising both hands high
Source: https://www.yipai360.com/photolivepc/?orderId=20260727104907864827

A cultural inheritor stated in an interview: "When I watched this dance, I felt it was our Black Tai thing. The movements have changed, but that flavor is still there. The headdress is still that headdress, the skirt is still that skirt. When young people watch this dance, they will know what Black Tai women are like."
At the same time, the dance achieves artistry through modern choreographic techniques, contemporary music arrangement, and immersive lighting design. The chief director explained the balancing strategy in an interview: "The problem we faced was that if we copied traditional movements completely, the stage effect would not be enough. But if we changed too much, the cultural inheritors would not recognize it. Our approach was to keep the core dynamics of the movements unchanged, but adjust rhythm, range, and formations. In this way, we preserved the cultural roots while achieving stage appeal."

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

1) Discussion

1.1) Identification of Core Black Tai Cultural Symbols
This study identifies four categories of cultural symbols in Dingjia Nü: material culture (inverted V-shaped headdress), ritual customs (Jinku Festival), production practices (rice farming and weaving), and collective memory (migration and matrilineal remnants). This finding is consistent with existing scholarship. Wang and Liu (2013) documented the "Dingjia Zou" migration memory, which corresponds to movements such as "supporting the home with both hands" and "S-shaped posture" in this study. Li, Q.'s (2017) summary of Black Tai dance dynamics is confirmed here as direct manifestations of production practice and collective memory symbols. Li, P.'s (2020) study on the Jinku Festival ritual provides a basis for identifying ritual custom symbols. The identification results align with the above literature, indicating that the dance vocabulary of Dingjia Nü has clear cultural origins.
1.2) Analysis of the Transformation Process
This study finds that Dingjia Nü converts static cultural symbols into dynamic dance language through three sub-processes: extraction, choreographic refinement, and stage reconstruction. This finding is highly consistent with Li, Z.'s (2025) three-stage methodology of "cultural symbol extraction-movement vocabulary transformation-stage image reconstruction." At the

same time, some life-inspired movements were regularized during refinement, which aligns with Bai's (2014) observation that ethnic dance modernization involves "processing while preserving traditional movement qualities."

It is worth noting that this study finds the transformation process is not a one-way linear flow but a dynamic process containing feedback loops. The choreographer mentioned in an interview: "Sometimes when we changed a movement and showed it to the cultural inheritors, they would say 'this is not right,' and we had to go back and rethink. This process went back and forth several rounds." This finding supplements the "evaluation-adjustment" link that is less addressed in existing theoretical frameworks.

1.3) Evaluation of the Balance between Authenticity and Artistry

This study finds that Dingjia Nü maintains authenticity at three levels movement vocabulary, cultural meanings, and costumes and props while achieving artistry through modern choreographic techniques, contemporary music arrangement, and immersive lighting. This finding aligns with Liu's (2024) concept of "dialogue between tradition and modernity." Sun and Ren (2017) point out that the inverted V-shaped headdress carries the cultural connotation of "carrying home on the head." This study finds that Dingjia Nü preserves the symbolic meaning of the headdress while enhancing its visual expression through enlargement and lighting design a concrete example of "balancing authenticity and artistry."

2) Conclusion

This study set out to examine the transformation of Black Tai traditional cultural symbols into choreographic language in the folk dance Dingjia Nü. Through a qualitative research approach combining case study, dance ethnography, and semiotic analysis, the study achieved its three objectives.

First, the study identified four categories of Black Tai cultural symbols embedded in the dance vocabulary of Dingjia Nü: material culture symbols (particularly the inverted V-shaped headdress), ritual custom symbols (derived from the "Jinku Festival"), production practice symbols (originating from rice farming and weaving), and collective memory symbols (encompassing migration history and matrilineal social remnants).

Second, the study analyzed how these static cultural symbols are converted into dynamic dance language through three sub-processes: extraction, choreographic refinement, and stage reconstruction. The extraction process selects the most representative cultural elements; the refinement process applies artistic techniques such as rhythm structuring, exaggeration, and repetition; and the reconstruction process integrates the refined movements with music, costumes, props, and lighting to create a unified stage image. The three sub-processes are not simply linear but contain feedback loops of evaluation and adjustment.

Third, the study evaluated how this transformation balances the preservation of cultural authenticity with the demands of contemporary stage artistry. The dance retains the core dynamic features of traditional Black Tai dance and the cultural meanings embedded in the movements, while simultaneously employing modern choreographic techniques, contemporary music arrangements, immersive lighting, and carefully shaped narrative structures. This balance is achieved through the collaborative involvement of traditional cultural inheritors and contemporary dance professionals.

In conclusion, Dingjia Nü successfully transforms Black Tai traditional cultural symbols into contemporary dance expression through a systematic pathway of identification, transformation, and expression. The dance serves as both a preservation of cultural heritage and a vibrant artistic creation that resonates with modern audiences, offering a replicable model for ethnic dance creation that balances authenticity with innovation.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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