THE EXPRESSION AND TRANSFORMATION OF BLACK TAI TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN ETHNIC DANCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SEMIOTICS: A CASE STUDY OF DINGJIA NÜ

Jin LI[1] and Supavadee POTIWETCHAKUL[1]
1 Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand;
s68563806001@ssru.ac.th (J. L.); supavadee.po@ssru.ac.th (S. P.)

ABSTRACT
This study aims (1) to identify and classify the body signs in Dingjia Nü based on Peirce's three categories of icon, indices, and symbol; (2) to analyze how each category of signs carries specific Black Tai traditional cultural meanings; (3) to reveal the semiotic transformation process from folk life signs to stage artistic signs and its realization path. A qualitative research approach was adopted, combining document study, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation, with thematic analysis conducted within Peirce's semiotic framework. The findings reveal that Dingjia Nü's sign system is composed of icons, indices, and symbols that collectively carry Black Tai farming culture, migration culture, matrilineal cultural relics, and belief and festival culture, accomplishing a creative transformation through refinement, meaning sublimation, and system integration. This study contributes to the semiotic research of ethnic dance and provides theoretical reference for the stage inheritance and contemporary creation of ethnic traditional culture.
Keywords: Perspective of Semiotics, Black Tai Traditional Culture, Dingjia Nü Dance, Semiotic Transformation

CITATION INFORMATION: Li, J., & Potiwetchakul, S. (2026). The Expression and Transformation of Black Tai Traditional Culture in Ethnic Dance from the Perspective of Semiotics: A Case Study of Dingjia Nü. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research, 4*(11), 15.

INTRODUCTION

As a core theory for studying meaning generation and sign expression, semiotics often adopts Peirce's trichotomy in dance research, regarding dance limbs, shapes, costumes, and props as interpretable sign systems to analyze the cultural connotations and value expressions behind body language. The Wenshan Black Tai preserve unique traditions including farming customs, matrilineal cultural relics, and the Jinku Festival. Their ethnic dance Dingjia Nü is created based on the life and migration memory of the Black Tai people, extracting typical movements such as stepping, hip swaying, opening-closing hands, and S-shaped postures, and integrating traditional Black Tai costumes and ritual elements. It is a typical work of folk culture moving towards stage art.

At present, most academic research on Black Tai dance focuses on dynamic characteristics and cultural background, while few studies systematically interpret its cultural expression and transformation from the perspective of semiotics. Therefore, this study uses semiotics as a theoretical tool to analyze the semiotic composition and expression mechanism of Dingjia Nü, explore how Black Tai traditional culture is semiotized, presented, and transformed in dance, enrich the semiotic research of ethnic dance, and provide theoretical support for the stage inheritance of ethnic culture.

Article's Objective

1) To identify and classify the body signs in Dingjia Nü based on Peirce's three categories (icon, indices, symbol).

2) To analyze how each category of signs carries specific Black Tai traditional cultural meanings.

3) To reveal the semiotic transformation process from folk life signs to stage artistic signs and its realization path.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) Documentary Sources

The literature directly relevant to this paper falls into two categories. The first concerns the semiotic study of dance. Scholars have applied semiotic theory to analyze dance body language, regarding dance movements, postures, and costumes as sign systems that carry cultural meanings. Yuan (2015) analyzed dance language signs from the perspective of Peirce's semiotics, demonstrating the applicability of the three categories of signs to dance analysis. Niu and Li (2021) examined movement vocabulary signs of Dunhuang dance, revealing how body movements function as signs within a cultural context. Luo (2024) explored the role of semiotic theory in dance choreography, emphasizing the importance of sign systems in creating and interpreting dance works. Qin (2025) provided a semiotic interpretation of body language in dance performance, taking The Rite of Spring as a case study. Ding (2016) discussed the application of semiotic theory in dance art, highlighting the value of semiotics in understanding dance as a cultural phenomenon.

The second category concerns the dynamic characteristics and cultural background of Black Tai dance. Li (2017) pioneered the systematic analysis of Black Tai dance dynamics, summarizing its movement system and establishing that the movement vocabulary originates from rice cultivation and sacrificial rituals. Bai (2014) analyzed the artistic characteristics of Tai dance in Wenshan, pointing out its unique rhythm and style. These studies provide foundational knowledge for identifying and interpreting the signs in Dingjia Nü.

2) Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Peirce's semiotic theory. Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of American pragmatism and semiotics, divided signs into three categories according to the relationship between the sign and its object: icon, indices, and symbol. Icons establish meaning through morphological similarity and action imitation; indices convey meaning through causal,

spatial, or temporal connection; symbols carry meaning through cultural convention and social consensus. (Zhao, 2018; Luo, 2024). This trichotomy provides a precise analytical tool for decoding body signs in dance.

In dance research, icons are typically manifested in movements that imitate daily life and natural forms; indices point to historical events, rituals, and social structures; symbols carry fixed cultural meanings recognized by the ethnic community. (Yuan, 2015; Qin, 2025). Based on this theoretical foundation, this paper applies Peirce's three categories to analyze the semiotic system of Dingjia Nü, examining how icons, indices, and symbols respectively carry and transform Black Tai traditional cultural connotations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data collection involves three methods: first, document study; second, in-depth interviews; third, participatory observation.

Data analysis employs thematic analysis combined with Peirce's semiotic framework. Interview recordings are transcribed into text, then coded and categorized through repeated reading. Signs are classified into icons, indices, and symbols, and their cultural meanings are interpreted within the theoretical framework.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1) Identification and Classification of Body Signs in Dingjia Nü

1.1 Icons in Dingjia Nü

An icon is a sign that establishes meaning connection through morphological similarity and action imitation, which is the most intuitive way of expression in dance. (Qin, 2025; Luo,2024). The icons in Dingjia Nü mainly come from the real production, life, and body forms of the Black Tai people, with high recognizability.

"Stepping and hip-swaying" directly imitate the way of foot landing and hip swing trajectory of Black Tai women in terrace farming and mountain walking, which is highly similar to life movements and belongs to a typical icon. "Opening-closing hands" imitate labor forms such as sowing, thread sorting, and weaving, reproducing production scenes with body shape, which is an iconic expression of labor behavior. "S-shaped flowing posture" imitates the body outline of Black Tai women in tube skirts and corresponds to the winding mountains and rivers in Wenshan, forming a double icon of human body and natural environment. These icons faithfully restore the prototype of life, enabling the audience to intuitively perceive the living style and body aesthetics of the Black Tai people. (Ding, 2016).



Figure 1 Black Tai women sitting together and embroidering.
Source: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/X_Uofo1H51_0FNxoYd9JrQ

The choreographer stated 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.” This statement indicates that movements such as “opening-closing hands” are not invented but extracted from daily productive practice as icons.

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.” This observation shows that iconic signs were rhythmically structured and enlarged for the stage while retaining their life prototype.

1.2 Indices in Dingjia Nü

An indices conveys meaning through causal connection, scene connection, and historical connection, independent of morphological similarity, and is mostly used to point to invisible history, rituals, and social structures. (Niu & Li, 2021; Qin, 2025). Dingjia Nü transmits ethnic memory and cultural information through indices.

"Forward-backward tilting and hand-raising" is directly related to the physical experience of ancestors climbing mountains and carrying loads during migration, indicating the ethnic migration history and evoking collective memory. "Upright upper body and stable head posture" is related to the wearing rules of the Black Tai "inverted V-shaped" hat, indicating the cultural concept of "home above the head" and the status of women in the ethnic group. "Sacrificial rhythm and blessing gestures" are associated with the Jinku Festival ritual scene, indicating ancestor worship, nature worship, and blessing culture, pointing to the original belief system of the Black Tai. Indices transform abstract contents such as history, beliefs, and rituals into perceptible physical signals, realizing the cross-temporal transmission of cultural information (Zhao, 2018).



Figure 2 A dancer in the rehearsal hall wearing the Dingjia Nü costume performing the “forward-backward tilting and raised hand” movement.
Source: Author’s own photograph, rehearsal hall, 2026.

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." This quotation directly shows that "slow walking," "palms-together gestures," and "blessing gestures" are not merely stage designs but indices pointing to the Jinku Festival ritual and ancestor worship.

1.3 Symbols in Dingjia Nü

A symbol is a sign with fixed cultural meaning recognized by the ethnic group for a long time, whose meaning comes from cultural identity and collective consensus. (Luo, 2024; Yuan, 2015). Dingjia Nü transforms the core cultural symbols of the Black Tai into stable symbols. "Costume color symbolism" means black symbolizes land and ethnic foundation, blue symbolizes water and life, green symbolizes nature and harvest, and white symbolizes purity and protection, forming a recognized symbolic system of Black Tai culture. The "inverted V-shaped hat" is the most iconic symbol of the Black Tai, fixedly symbolizing the concept of "home supremacy" and matrilineal cultural relics, and is an important symbol of ethnic identity. "Circular formation and collective rhythm" originates from the tradition of sacrifice and collective labor, symbolizing ethnic unity, order, and community consciousness, strengthening cultural cohesion. "Body temperament symbolism" means the upright, calm, and dignified overall temperament symbolizes the diligent, tenacious, and confident national spirit of Black Tai women. Symbols have a stable cultural coding function and are the core carrier for constructing ethnic cultural identity. (Zhou & Zhao, 2018).



Figure 3 Close-up front view of the inverted V-shaped headdress.
Source: Author's own photograph, 2026.

The chief director explained 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." This statement indicates that the inverted V-shaped headdress was deliberately intensified as a stage symbol carrying the meanings of "carrying home on the head" and matrilineal cultural relics.

2) Semiotic Carrying of Black Tai Traditional Culture in Dingjia Nü

First, farming culture. Icons reproduce rice farming and weaving, reflecting the agriculture-oriented survival wisdom. Movements such as "stepping and hip-swaying" and "opening-closing hands" directly imitate the physical postures of terrace farming and textile labor, making agricultural production visible on stage.

Second, migration culture. Indices record migration history and strengthen ethnic memory. "Forward-backward tilting" and "hand-raising" point to the physical experiences of ancestors crossing mountains and rivers, while the recurring "S-shaped flowing posture" metaphorically represents the continuous marching during migration.
Third, matrilineal cultural relics. Symbols highlight the status of women and retain social structural genes. The female-leading choreographic arrangement, combined with the upright and confident body temperament symbolized by the inverted V-shaped hat, reflects the dominant position of women in Black Tai matrilineal society.
Fourth, belief and festival culture. Indices and symbols restore the Jinku Festival ritual and present original beliefs. Sacrificial rhythms, blessing gestures, and circular formations point to ancestor worship and community cohesion, while the overall ceremonial atmosphere is preserved through stage reconstruction.



Figure 4 Elderly blessing ritual at the Jinku Festival, with Dai people drumming in a group performance.
Source：https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qCJ6fsE51-3JHStTPd7_zQ

3) Semiotic Transformation from Traditional Culture to Stage Art
First, semiotic refinement. Scattered life movements are standardized, rhythmized, and visualized to improve stage expressiveness. The natural "opening-closing hands" from weaving is given rhythmic structure and expanded range; the "forward-backward tilting" from migration is exaggerated and repeated to enhance emotional impact. 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.”
Second, meaning sublimation. Practical meaning is sublimated into emotional and spiritual meaning to highlight cultural value. The simple act of "carrying a load" is transformed into the spiritually charged "supporting the home with both hands," elevating utilitarian labor into a symbol of homeland devotion. 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.”

Third, system integration. Movements, costumes, formations, and music are integrated into a unified stage semiotic system to realize the modern expression of traditional signs. Traditional instruments are combined with modern orchestration, costumes are adapted for stage visibility, and lighting design amplifies symbolic meanings. 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.” This feedback indicates that stage transformation did not sever cultural identity but strengthened intergenerational transmission through symbolic intensification.

This transformation path not only retains cultural authenticity but also conforms to contemporary stage aesthetics, providing a referable semiotic transformation model for ethnic dance creation. (Luo, 2024).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

1) Discussion

1.1 Identification and Classification of Body Signs in Dingjia Nü

This study finds that the body signs in Dingjia Nü can be classified into Peirce's three categories: icons ("stepping and hip-swaying," "opening-closing hands," "S-shaped flowing posture"), indices ("forward-backward tilting and hand-raising," "upright upper body and stable head posture," "sacrificial rhythm and blessing gestures"), and symbols (costume colors, inverted V-shaped hat, circular formation and collective rhythm, body temperament symbolism). This finding is consistent with existing scholarship. Yuan (2015) demonstrated from the perspective of Peirce's semiotics that dance movements and postures can be systematically interpreted within the three-category framework, and pointed out that the icon is the most fundamental and intuitive sign type in dance, which is consistent with this study's classification of life-like movements such as "stepping and hip-swaying" and "opening-closing hands" as icons; Niu & Li (2021) verified the unique role of indices in transmitting historical and cultural information in their semiotic analysis of Dunhuang dance movement vocabulary, which mutually confirms this study's conclusion that "forward-backward tilting and hand-raising" serves as an indices pointing to migration history; Qin (2025) illustrated the core function of symbols in constructing cultural identity in dance performance through The Rite of Spring, which is consistent with this study's conclusion that the inverted V-shaped hat and costume colors function as stable symbols.

1.2 Semiotic Carrying of Black Tai Traditional Culture in Dingjia Nü

This study finds that the three categories of signs collectively carry four core traditional cultures of the Black Tai: farming culture (carried by icons), migration culture (carried by indices), matrilineal cultural relics (carried by symbols), and belief and festival culture (carried by both indices and symbols). This result is consistent with existing literature. Li (2017) demonstrated that Black Tai dance movement vocabulary originates from rice cultivation and sacrificial rituals, which is consistent with this study’s identification of the symbolic origins of farming culture and belief and festival culture. Studies on the ritual process of the Jinku Festival reveal that sacrificial rhythms and blessing gestures carry the cultural connotations of ancestor worship and community cohesion, mutually reinforcing this study’s semiotic carrying analysis of belief and festival culture.

1.3 Semiotic Transformation from Traditional Culture to Stage Art

This study finds that Dingjia Nü accomplishes the creative transformation from folk life signs to stage artistic signs through three processes—semiotic refinement, meaning sublimation, and system integration—and that this transformation both preserves cultural authenticity and conforms to contemporary stage aesthetics. This result is consistent with existing research. Luo(2024), in exploring the role of semiotic theory in dance choreography, proposed that the

transformation from life materials to stage signs requires a process of "selection-refinement-reorganization," which is highly consistent in logic with this study's three-stage path of "refinement-sublimation-integration"; Bai (2014) observation that the modernization of ethnic dance involves "processing while preserving traditional movement qualities" also supports this study's finding that life movements are standardized and rhythmized during the transformation process; Ding (2016) pointed out that semiotic theory helps to understand the transformation mechanism of dance from life form to art form, which is consistent with this study's transformational path analysis in theoretical orientation. The above consistency indicates that the semiotic transformation practice of Dingjia Nü conforms to the general pattern of ethnic dance moving from folk inheritance to stage creation.

2) Conclusion

First, the dance semiotic system of Dingjia Nü is organically composed of three categories of signs: icons, indices, and symbols. Icons intuitively reproduce farming labor scenes through morphological similarity, indices point to migration memory and belief rituals through causal and historical connections, and symbols carry matrilineal cultural relics and ethnic identity through cultural conventions. The three categories of signs together accomplish the semiotic carrying and expression of the four core traditions of the Black Tai: farming culture, migration culture, matrilineal cultural relics, and belief and festival culture.

Second, Dingjia Nü realizes the creative transformation from folk life signs to stage artistic signs, with the transformation path embodied in three processes: semiotic refinement, meaning sublimation, and system integration. This path preserves the authenticity of Black Tai traditional culture while endowing it with artistic expression forms that conform to contemporary stage aesthetics, realizing the artistic sublimation of ethnic dance as "originating from life yet transcending life."

Third, from the perspective of semiotic communication effect, the semiotic system of Dingjia Nü is clear and highly recognizable, which can effectively transcend language and regional barriers to achieve cultural communication, while simultaneously strengthening the internal cultural identity of the Black Tai ethnic group.

In conclusion, Dingjia Nü successfully transforms Black Tai traditional cultural symbols into contemporary dance expression through the systematic path of "identification-classification-carrying-transformation." The dance serves as both a living preservation of cultural heritage and a stage artwork that resonates with contemporary audiences, providing an operational case analysis for the semiotic study of ethnic dance, and offering theoretical reference for the staged inheritance and contemporary creation of ethnic traditional culture.

REFERENCES

Bai, Y. (2014). The artistic characteristics and creative thoughts of Dai ethnic dance in Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province. *Song of the Yellow River,* (5), 84-85.

Ding, Q. (2016). Application of semiotic theory in dance art. *Northern Music, 36*(23), 146.

Li, Q. (2017). *Analysis and presentation of the dynamic characteristics of the Black Dai dance in Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province* [Master's thesis]. Beijing Dance Academy.

Luo, Y. (2024). *The role of semiotic theory in dance choreography* [Master's thesis]. Shandong University of Arts.

Niu, M., & Li, Z. (2021). Analysis on movement vocabulary signs of Dunhuang dance from the perspective of Peirce's semiotics. *Journal of Wuzhou University, 31*(4), 67-75.

Qin, X. (2025). Semiotic interpretation of body language in dance performance: Taking dance theatre The Rite of Spring as an example. *Art Outlook,* (24), 52-54.

Yuan, J. (2015). Analysis of the dance language symbols from the perspective of Peirce semiotics. *Journal of Chongqing University of Arts and Sciences (Social Sciences Edition), 34*(6), 92-97.

Zhao, X. (2018). Analysis of dance body language from the perspective of semiotics: A case study of Song Xian Dance in the dance drama Confucius. *Contemporary Music,* (6), 113-115.

Zhou, L., & Zhao, X. (2018). A study of tea-picking dance from the perspective of semiotics: Taking Tujia tea-picking dance in Hubei area as an example. *Tea in Fujian, 40*(12), 432.

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

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. This is a fully open-access article distributed under the terms of the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).