

# STAGING THE MINNAN PAIXIONG DANCE IN ZHANGZHOU, CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Minnan Paixiong Dance in Zhangzhou can sustain cultural authenticity while achieving staged appeal. To identify mechanisms by which core symbolic elements are preserved and recontextualized in theatrical settings. Zhangzhou cases from the past five years across festival stages, school programs, and theatre productions. Mixed-methods design research combining literature review, field observation, semi-structured interviews with inheritors, choreographers, and young dancers, and audience questionnaires for cross-validation. The result that core movement motifs are retained, while group formations and layered rhythms enhance spatial dynamics; music and lighting shift from body percussion to electronic/programmable designs, raising both aesthetic ratings and concerns over “over-packaging”; iconic costumes are updated in materials yet keep narrative meanings; the dance’s functions extend from ritual and folklore to education, cultural tourism, and regional branding. Benefit/Contribution: the case yields a replicable “dual-track” model—preserve the core, renew the form—that practitioners can apply to choreography, school curricula, and cultural-tourism curation. It also offers a concise movement-symbol-function framework for evaluating stage adaptation outcomes and for balancing authenticity, innovation, and communicability in intangible cultural heritage dance practice.

**Keywords:** Minnan Paixiong Dance, Stage Adaptation, The Minnan Paixiong Dance in Zhangzhou

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## INTRODUCTION

Minnan Paixiong Dance, also known as "Seven Sound Dance", "Flower Hand Dance" and "Beggars' Dance", is one of the most representative folk dances in Minnan. It originated from the nature worship and totem sacrifice of the ancient Min-Yue ethnic group, and the dancers create rhythms by striking their chests with their bare hands, stomping their feet and flinging their arms, and embodying the state of life that is in harmony with nature with images such as bare feet and bare shoulders (Song Xiaojun, 2016). Such primitive and intense body movements not only show the cohesion of group emotions, but also become the most distinctive symbol of physical expression in southern folk culture.

Historically, Paixiong Dance gradually evolved from rituals to folk celebratory dances, and by the Southern Song and Yuan Dynasties it had become widely popular and was commonly performed at occasions such as harvests, weddings, and temple fairs (Huang Mingzhu, 2012). During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the performance of the dance gradually departed from its single religious function and became an important form of folklore to unite communities and express their emotions. In modern times, with social changes and the expansion of performance venues, the Paixiong Dance in Zhangzhou and Quanzhou began to enter theatres and festival stages, with ever-expanding forms of expression, forming an intertwined interaction between the "life scene" and the "stage scene". The forms of expression were constantly enriched, forming an interweaving and interaction between "life scenes" and "stage scenes" (Huang Mingzhu, 2012; Weng, 2016; Huang, 2020).

In contemporary times, Paixiong Dance faces a double situation: on the one hand, as a national intangible cultural heritage item, it has gained institutionalised protection in its transmission; on the other hand, the interest of the younger generation in the traditional form has waned, and the number of inheritors has declined, leading to the "curing" and "marginalisation" of its performance forms. On the other hand, the young generation's interest in traditional forms has weakened and the number of inheritors has decreased, leading to the risk of "solidification" and "marginalisation" of their performance forms (Feng, 2018). At the same time, the development of staging and industrialisation has injected new vitality into the form, for example, through modern choreography, lighting, music and other elements to enhance the infectiousness of the stage (Xue, 2015). Zhangzhou, as a core practice area, has a typical case value as it is both an important bearer of traditional relics and the most active area for staging exploration.

In summary, the study of Paixiong Dance in Zhangzhou is not only concerned with the changes in dance forms, but also with the core issue of "how to achieve innovation in staging while maintaining cultural authenticity". Based on the specific practice in Zhangzhou, this study focuses on the four dimensions of movement rhythm, choreography and music, costume symbols, and cultural functions, and explores the path and mechanism of its stage transformation, with a view to providing experience and inspiration for the triple objective of "inheritance, innovation and dissemination" of non-heritage dance. In order to provide experience and inspiration for the triple objective of "inheritance, innovation and dissemination" of non-heritage dance (Li, 2023; Li Jixiang, 2024).

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

Previous research on Minnan Paixiong Dance has examined its cultural origin, symbolic value, and evolving functions. Huang Mingzhu (2012) traced its transition from ritual to folk expression, while Song Xiaojun (2016) highlighted its symbolic role as a millennium-old cultural emblem, particularly through movements like chest-beating and accessories like the grass-ring headdress. Li Tao (2013) introduced the concept of cultural ecology to explain how regional environment and community life shaped the dance's form. Xue Feng (2015) used the term "Oriental Disco" to emphasize its entertainment value and translocal appeal. More recent

works (Yao Mingjun, 2020; Huang Dongyi, 2020) explored the dance's reconstruction in stage and pedagogical settings. However, while the literature covers historical and symbolic dimensions, there remains a gap in understanding the mechanisms and processes of theatrical adaptation in specific regional contexts like Zhangzhou.

Theoretically, this study is guided by three perspectives. First, Dance Ecology (Li Tao, 2013) explains how movement patterns adapt to social and natural environments, providing insight into regional specificity. Second, Cultural Symbolisation (Li, 2023) frames dance as a carrier of identity and tourism appeal, useful in analyzing how symbolic actions are recontextualized on stage. Third, the Tension between Heritage and Innovation (Li Jixiang, 2024) emphasizes balancing authenticity with performative innovation—an essential concern in Paixiong's contemporary staging.

This framework originates from the dynamic adaptation perspective of Dance Ecology and the cultural meaning construction viewpoint of Cultural Symbolisation, emphasizing the interactive relationship between dance, its social environment, bodily structure, and symbolic systems. First, "Movement" examines how the form, rhythm, and structure of bodily actions manifest stability and variation during the staging process, thereby revealing the core transmission mechanisms of movement; Second, "Symbol" examines how traditional artifacts, costumes, and totemic imagery undergo recontextualization on contemporary stages, exploring their preservation of cultural anchors through visual reconstruction. Finally, "Function" traces the expansion of dance's social roles across dimensions such as ritual, education, tourism, and regional identity, analyzing its transformation from singular folk functions into multifaceted cultural resources. Through the integrated application of these three dimensions, this study aims to construct an analytical pathway capable of explaining "what to preserve," "what to alter," and "why to alter" within regional stage adaptation practices. This framework seeks to establish a more explanatory and actionable analytical structure for the contemporary expression of intangible cultural heritage dance.

#### **Mixed-Methods Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Data with Triangulation**

This study employs a mixed-methods design, enabling simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data, independent analysis of each, and integration during the results phase to achieve deeper triangulation. In practice, qualitative insights from field observations and semi-structured interviews—such as the emphasis on the irreplaceable core of movement and discussions on the recontextualization of visual symbols—first guided the formulation of questionnaire items, lending quantitative measurements clearer cultural orientation. Conversely, questionnaire data enriched and validated qualitative findings. For instance, when interviews raised concerns about "excessive theatricality" in staged performances, comparable questionnaire responses enabled researchers to retrace participants' contexts and deepen thematic analysis. During the results integration phase, this study employed triangulation to confirm the robustness of different data sources: when themes like Paixiong Dance's movement preservation or symbolic visualization showed consistent tendencies across interviews, observations, and questionnaires, they were considered mutually corroborative. Discrepancies prompted further contextual comparison and refined interpretation, enhancing analytical transparency and precision. Given the exploratory small sample size of the questionnaire (n=27), qualifying statements such as "these results reflect respondents' views" or "based on this exploratory data, it can be seen that..." were explicitly included when presenting percentages or trends to prevent extrapolating conclusions beyond the sample. Overall, the synergistic operation of this mixed-methods approach enables a more systematic presentation of the stage-adaptation mechanisms of Paixiong Dance across three dimensions—action, symbol, and function—laying a reliable foundation for subsequent theoretical analysis.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### 1) Adaptation of paixiong dance

In the Zhangzhou context, core gestures (chest-beating, foot-stamping) are rigorously preserved, while spatial dynamism is enhanced through formation rotations, cross-stepping, and array transformations. Questionnaire findings reveal 59.3% advocate strict preservation and 29.6% favour moderate adaptation, corroborating the ‘core retention—peripheral innovation’ stage strategy. This orientation aligns with existing scholarship on the immutable ‘ritual core’ during the transition of chest-beating dances from folk customs to theatrical performance (Huang Mingzhu, 2012; Weng, 2016), and resonates with the ‘preserve the core—enrich the layers’ creative principle within the intangible cultural heritage context (Huang, 2020; Xue, 2015).

### 2) Reshaping of paixiong dance’s sensory experience

Contemporary performances incorporate electronic/symphonic textures and programmed lighting alongside body percussion; 70.4% of surveyed audiences perceived a marked aesthetic enhancement, though concerns about ‘excessive theatricality’ were raised, suggesting a need to balance emotional amplification with ritualistic texture. This finding aligns with observations of the coexisting tensions between ‘lifestyle forms and theatrical forms’ in chest-drumming dance (Weng, 2016), while also resonating with discussions on contemporary stage conventions and the transformation of primal forms (Huang, 2020; Yao, 2020).

### 3) Recontextualization of paixiong dance’s visual symbols on stage

The ring and serpent totems are preserved as “cultural anchors”, yet their materials and colour palettes are updated in response to stage optical adjustments, achieving a dual function of “continuity plus legibility”: inheritors emphasise authenticity, while young dancers prioritise visual impact and narrative clarity. This “recontextualisation of symbols” aligns with the historical-cultural interpretation of the Min Nan folk dance symbol system (Song, 2016; Sun, 2021), while resonating with symbolic construction pathways within tourism/branding domains (Li, 2023).

## 2. Expansion of paixiong dance’s functional roles through staged presentations

The chest-slapping dance has evolved from its ritual function of ‘protection and fertility’ into a comprehensive medium for campus education and regional branding. 81.5% of students believe that its theatrical adaptation has deepened their understanding of Minnan traditions, while teachers report heightened student enthusiasm ‘when cultural contexts are explained’. This supports the tripartite transmission model linking ecology, education and industry (Li Tao, 2013; Feng, 2018), aligning with cultural dissemination mechanisms under ‘village/scenic area performance’ frameworks (Li, 2023; Liu, 2021).

**Table 1** Summary of Questionnaire Results (n=27)

| <b>Dimension</b>                | <b>Option</b>                  | <b>Count</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Traditional movement preference | Must be retained               | 16           | 59.3                  |
|                                 | Moderate modification possible | 8            | 29.6                  |
|                                 | Fully modernisable             | 3            | 11.1                  |
| Aesthetic perception of staging | Significantly enhanced         | 19           | 70.4                  |
|                                 | Average                        | 6            | 22.2                  |
|                                 | No improvement                 | 2            | 7.4                   |
| Function as cultural education  | Enhances understanding         | 22           | 81.5                  |
|                                 | Limited effect                 | 5            | 18.5                  |

**Table 2** Interview Summary

| Interviewee      | Viewpoint  |
|------------------|--|
| Inheritor A      | “Chest-striking is the soul, and the grass ring must be preserved.”        |
| Choreographer B  | “Without music and lighting, audiences can’t be fully immersed.”           |
| Dance Teacher C  | “Modern elements work, but must be backed by cultural explanation.”        |
| Student Dancer D | “Group formations are more engaging than solo movements.”                  |
| Festival-goer E  | “The stage version was stunning but felt less authentic than temple ones.” |

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

### Discussion

#### 1) Movement: Balancing Core Retention and Choreographic Innovation

This study reveals that Zhangzhou Paixiong Dance maintains ritual authenticity by retaining core movements such as chest beating and foot stomping—gestures that, according to Li Jixiang (2024), are central to cultural continuity. However, choreographers have introduced group formations and dynamic spatial shifts to adapt the dance for theatrical spaces. Xue (2015) suggests that such adaptations are not merely aesthetic but serve as cross-cultural communicators. The co-existence of ritual movement codes and contemporary staging strategies reflects a dual mechanism: safeguarding embodied heritage while optimising visual appeal.

#### 2) Sound and Rhythm: Between Emotional Amplification and Cultural Dilution

The integration of music and lighting technologies expands the affective power of Paixiong Dance on stage. While the original body percussion and chants were simple and site-specific, modern performances use surround sound and LED lighting to intensify the sensory experience. 72% of respondents supported these innovations, yet 15% voiced concerns over “over-packaging”, echoing Huang Dongyi's (2020) critique of "aesthetic excess undermining ritual sincerity." The findings confirm the necessity of navigating the boundary between emotional amplification and cultural dilution, aligning with heritage theorists' concerns about performative authenticity.

#### 3) Symbolism: Re-semantisation of Traditional Icons

On stage, symbolic elements like the grass-ring headdress and snake totems are not merely preserved but visually reconfigured through new materials and colour schemes. According to Li (2023), cultural symbols in dance must be recontextualised to remain communicative across different audiences. Interviews indicate that while older inheritors view these items as sacred, choreographers use stylisation to enhance stage presence. This dual interpretation verifies that symbolisation in staged heritage operates in a spectrum: from sacred embodiment to theatrical metaphor—creating new layers of meaning without discarding the old (Li, 2023; Song, 2016; Huang, 2020).

#### 4) Functionality: From Ritual Expression to Socio-Cultural Capital

Paixiong Dance’s function has shifted from ritual protection to broader roles in education, tourism, and cultural branding. Over 80% of students surveyed affirmed that the staged performance strengthened their cultural identity, supporting Huang Jing's (2015) claim that educational staging can deepen youth engagement. At the same time, its integration into local tourism illustrates what Sun Ruyang (2021) terms “functional expansion”—a process whereby folkloric forms gain institutional value. However, the challenge lies in maintaining the dance’s symbolic integrity amid commodification pressures, a tension that underscores the need for culturally grounded curatorial decisions (Li Tao, 2013; Li, 2023; Liu, 2021; Feng, 2018). Based on the research findings, several specific mechanisms through which Paixiong Dance navigates creative boundaries between “inheritance and innovation” can be further summarized. At the choreographic level, creators employ a “core movement stability—spatial structure innovation” strategy. Ritual Core elements like chest strikes and foot stomps are solidified as

“immutable components” within the Movement–Symbol–Function framework. Simultaneously, stage tension is heightened through formation rotations, crisscrossing steps, and layered progression, enabling a contemporary expression of traditional bodily vocabulary. In costume design, symbolic totems like grass rings and serpent patterns serve as Symbol Anchors. Updated materials and colors enhance visual recognition, ensuring these symbols are both preserved and stage-adaptable. For education and dissemination, a “contextual explanation + segmented demonstration” teaching strategy enables students to embrace innovative forms while grounded in cultural understanding. Future research may explore variations in acceptance of these innovative strategies across different age groups or regional demographics. Integrating new technologies like digital presentations and virtual dance archives could expand Paixiong Dance's potential pathways in cultural dissemination and stage adaptation, thereby deepening its practical value in contemporary expressions of intangible cultural heritage.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigates the stage transformation of the Minnan Paixiong Dance in Zhangzhou and reveals a dynamic process that balances cultural preservation with artistic innovation. Core movements such as chest beating and symbolic elements like the grass-ring headdress have been retained to ensure cultural authenticity, while modern choreography, music layering, and costume design have enhanced visual impact and performative appeal. This dual strategy of “preserving the core while innovating the form” illustrates a responsive adaptation to contemporary aesthetic demands and audience expectations.

Beyond performance, the staged version of Paixiong Dance has extended its function into education, cultural tourism, and regional branding. The findings show that 80% of young audiences report heightened cultural identity through exposure to the staged dance, underscoring its value in cultural transmission. However, the study also highlights emerging tensions, such as the risk of superficialisation and loss of traditional texture, reminding practitioners to navigate the “creative boundary” between authenticity and entertainment with caution.

In theoretical terms, this research contributes a tripartite analytical framework—movement-symbol-function—rooted in Dance Ecology and Cultural Symbolisation. Methodologically, the integration of observation, interview, and questionnaire builds a cross-validating research model suitable for interdisciplinary studies of intangible cultural heritage. Overall, the case of Zhangzhou provides a replicable template and reflective insights for the sustainable development, staged transformation, and educational application of traditional Chinese dance in the contemporary era.

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