A STUDY ON THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND INTEGRATION MECHANISM OF DANCE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE ZHUANG AND HAN NATIONALITIES IN THE NANLING CORRIDOR*

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Abstract

This study aimed to: (1) examine the cultural representation and integration forms of Zhuang-Han dance interaction in the Nanling Corridor through five representative dances, including Qilin Dance, Tea-Picking Dance, Huapo Dance, Dragon Dance, and Fire Cat Dance; (2) analyze the person–behavior–environment interaction mechanisms underlying Zhuang-Han dance integration based on Triadic Reciprocal Determinism; and (3) identify the comprehensive integration mechanisms of Zhuang-Han dance interaction and their relationship with cultural convergence and shared cultural identity. A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining field observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaire surveys. Data were collected through more than 10 field observations and four rehearsal participations in representative areas of the Nanling Corridor, interviews with intangible cultural heritage inheritors, dancers, experts, and local cultural practitioners, as well as

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questionnaires measuring perceptions of dance integration and cultural identity. Qualitative data were analyzed through comparative case analysis, while quantitative data were used to supplement the interpretation of cultural integration patterns. The results showed that: (1) the five representative dances demonstrated five distinct integration forms: symbol extension and local reconstruction, agricultural cultural interaction, social function expansion, physical integration under cultural identity, and cultural vocabulary transplantation; (2) Zhuang-Han dance integration was formed through continuous interaction among individual cognition and physical habits, dance performance behaviors, and geographic, economic, and socio-cultural environments; and (3) the comprehensive mechanism of dance integration followed a dynamic process of contact, selection, adaptation, and reconstruction, indicating that cultural integration occurs through interaction rather than one-way assimilation.

Keywords: Nanling Corridor, Zhuang Dance and Han Dance, Triadic Reciprocal Determinism, Cultural Convergence

Introduction

The Nanling Corridor, located at the junction of Hunan, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Jiangxi provinces in China, is one of the most culturally rich areas among the “ethnic corridors” proposed by Fei Xiaotong. Over the past two thousand years, Han immigrants and indigenous ethnic groups such as the Zhuang have had frequent contact and interaction along this corridor, forming an ethnic relational pattern of “you in me and me in you” (Fei, 1989). As a composite carrier of physical memory, ritual performance, and aesthetic expression, dance records the micro-level traces of this long-term interaction through highly condensed bodily vocabulary. The five culturally integrated representative dances—Qilin Dance, Tea-Picking Dance, Huapo Dance, Dragon Dance, and Fire

Cat Dance—each embody physical imprints of Zhuang-Han cultural integration through different pathways.

Current research mostly focuses on sociological and anthropological perspectives, formal descriptions, or origin studies, but lacks theoretical explanations of the internal dynamic mechanisms of integration. Existing studies on dances in the Nanling Corridor have largely concentrated on the Yao people in Guangdong and Hezhou of Guangxi, while the role of Zhuang-Han dances in ethnic communication, exchange, and integration has not been sufficiently examined. Previous studies have also tended to overlook the active function of dance culture itself: dance is not merely a passive container of cultural information, but an embodied field for constructing ethnic integration, merging cultural boundaries, and facilitating social contact and cohesion (Fei, 2009). Therefore, this study focuses on five representative Zhuang-Han interactive dances in the Nanling Corridor and explores their cultural representation, integration mechanisms, and significance for understanding ethnic communication and cultural convergence.

Using Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism as the analytical framework, supplemented by concepts such as "contact", "selection", and "integration" from Cultural Convergence Theory, this paper systematically compares and analyzes the mechanisms of the five dances. It aims to provide a theoretical perspective for understanding ethnic dance integration from an embodied and interactive viewpoint.

Objectives

1. To examine the cultural representation and integration forms of Zhuang-Han dance interaction in the Nanling Corridor through five representative dance cases.

2. To analyze the person–behavior–environment interaction mechanisms of Zhuang-Han dance integration based on Triadic Reciprocal Determinism.

3. To summarize the comprehensive integration mechanism of Zhuang-Han dance interaction and explain its significance for cultural convergence and shared cultural identity in the Nanling Corridor.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study involves two major academic contexts: Triadic Reciprocal Determinism and Cultural Convergence Theory, alongside relevant research on the Nanling Corridor and dance integration.

First, Cultural Convergence Theory. In 1950, Robert E. Park, a sociologist of the Chicago School, proposed the relational theory of "contact–competition–accommodation–assimilation" in Race and Culture (Park, 1950), representing the earliest framework of cultural convergence theory. Park applied this theory to sociological, immigration, and cultural acculturation research. Domestic research on cultural integration combines theoretical and practical dimensions, rooted in traditional Central Plains culture and advocating selective integration of "retaining the essence and discarding the dross", with ethnic and contemporary characteristics. Distinct from Western globalized cultural convergence perspectives, localized Chinese theories are based on the historical background of multi-ethnic integration and diverse realities such as ethnic migration and economic exchange, forming a research framework adaptable to the development of ethnic cultures in China, which effectively explains the historical and realistic logic of the symbiosis and evolution of Chinese ethnic cultures.

Second, Triadic Reciprocal Determinism. Bandura (2001) proposed Triadic Reciprocal Determinism in social cognitive theory, emphasizing a causal and dynamic interactive triangular relationship among the person, behavior, and environment. Here, the "person" includes cognition, emotion, and physical traits;

"behavior" refers to concrete overt actions; and "environment" encompasses physical and social settings (Habermas, 1981). This theory has been widely applied in psychology, education, and cross-cultural adaptation research, yet remains unexplored in studies of physical practices in ethnic dance integration. This study integrates the theory to construct a "person–behavior–environment" three-dimensional analytical framework applicable to ethnic dance research.

Third, research on dance integration in the Nanling Corridor. This study is grounded in Fei Xiaotong's concept of the "ethnic corridor", which laid the foundation for researching regional inter-ethnic interactions. Regarding dance research, Hu and Cao (2023) verified the communication, exchange, and integration of Yao dance in the Nanling Corridor, described the identity, modalities, and discursive functions of intangible cultural heritage dancers; Huang (2011) analyzed the "primitive remnants" and developmental trends in the inheritance of Zhuang folk dances. These studies provide important background support for this research, yet generally lack theoretical integration and fail to extract systematic mechanisms through cross-case comparisons.

In summary, this study builds on previous research by combining Cultural Convergence Theory and Triadic Reciprocal Determinism, filling theoretical gaps in artistic dimensions and quantitative research. It also compensates for insufficient depth in studies of Zhuang-Han dance integration in the Nanling Corridor, analyzes the underlying motivations of cultural integration, and provides references for subsequent related research.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach incorporating observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Observation includes participatory and non-participatory methods, with over 10 on-site observations and four rehearsal participations conducted in Nanning, Hezhou, Yulin, and other locations. Dance

performance forms, props and costumes, folk contexts, and audience feedback were documented, and research samples were collected via audio-visual recording. Interviews targeting experts, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, performers, and local officials were conducted to clarify the historical context, artistic characteristics, and inheritance status of Zhuang-Han dances, overcoming the superficial limitations of pure observation. Questionnaires were used to supplement qualitative research by collecting extensive subjective perceptions of dance integration and ethnic cultural identity from practitioners inside and outside the province. Quantitative data concretize the influence and correlation mechanisms of cultural integration, remedying the inability of observation and interviews to capture group-shared cognitions and implicit attitudes. The three methods complement each other to enhance the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the research.

Results

1. Cultural Integration Forms and Triadic Reciprocal Mechanisms of the Five Dances

1.1 Qilin Dance: Individual Physical Habits Driving Environmental Adaptation Through Symbol Extension and Local Reconstruction

This study samples the Zhuang Qilin Dance of Changtang Town and the Zhuang Phoenix Qilin Dance of Hengxian as paradigms. As an important intangible cultural heritage dance, the prevalence of Qilin Dance in Guangxi is closely linked to the southward migration of Central Plains people to the Nanling region in ancient China, and it enjoys wide popularity, mostly performed during festivals and celebrations. Its prop structure and performance framework inherit Central Plains traditions. After entering Zhuang-inhabited areas, it underwent significant localization: prop materials shifted from original bamboo strips and silk to local bamboo, colored paper, and Zhuang embroidery; kylin scale patterns incorporate

Zhuang brocade sun motifs; the kylin's size was reduced from 1–2 meters to 80–90 centimeters, rendering its image more delicate. In performance movements, Han Qilin Dance emphasizes skills such as tumbling and jumping, with gaits including "standing steps" and "horse stance steps", and large-stride circular field steps. In contrast, Zhuang dancers integrate their distinctive "knee trembling" movement and "cross steps" into Han circular field steps, featuring small, gentle, and rhythmic footwork. In terms of performers, Han Qilin Dance is mostly performed by adult males due to frequent lifting and highly skilled movements. Socially, its function expanded from the "benevolent beast" in Han patriarchal culture to a community patron deity or mascot, with parade routes crossing multi-ethnic settlements. This reflects a typical model of "kylin" symbol borrowing and local reconstruction: reconfiguring changes through the selection and collision of Han symbolic frameworks and Zhuang physical habits.



Figure 1 Left: Zhuang Qilin Dance of Guangxi; Right: Han Qilin Dance of the Central Plains (Source: Photographed by researchers)

The evolution of Qilin Dance in the Guangxi section of the Nanling Corridor aligns with the formation mechanism of triadic reciprocity. First, at the behavioral level, Zhuang dancers' "knee trembling" and "cross steps" are physical habits accumulated due to Guangxi's humid, muddy roads and mountainous hilly terrain, distinct from the Central Plains plains, which have been incorporated into dance movements. Second, dancers' inherent physical habits are unconsciously integrated into Qilin Dance movements and gaits upon contact, representing a comprehensive outcome of human-nature integration. Third, in movement characteristics, the dance transformed from the majestic, mysterious, highly difficult jumps and acrobatics of Han Qilin Dance to a more approachable and natural style. This adaptation is both actively created by Zhuang dancers and shaped by feedback from the audience and ethnic social environment during performances.

The spread of Qilin Dance from the Central Plains to Guangxi via the Nanling Corridor represents an integration process essentially consisting of the matching of individual physical habits with specific environments. It is not only a process of behavior generation through individual-environment interaction in triadic reciprocity, but also a result of cultural selection and integration. Zhuang dancers incorporate their perception-motor patterns into Han symbolic frameworks, complete integration in social activities such as fairs and festivals, and ultimately form a style adapted to a multi-ethnic coexisting environment. The body serves as the key medium for symbol borrowing and local reconstruction.

1.2 Tea-Picking Dance: Bidirectional Construction of Environment and Behavior Through Cultural Interaction of Agricultural Civilization

As a major tea exporter, China's tea-picking dance is widely spread throughout the Central Plains, East China, and Southwest China, originating from customs related to tea cultivation and seasonal changes. The tea-picking dance in the Guangxi section of the Nanling Corridor retains characteristics of Han

Chinese labor dances, with upper body movements mimicking tea picking and processing. Zhuang dancers incorporate lower body movements such as "duancuo bu" (frequent weight shifts, side kicks, slight twists of the waist and hips, and jumps) into their dance. Performance venues have expanded from tea gardens to markets, and the music has absorbed elements of Zhuang eight-tone music and antiphonal folk songs, becoming a cross-ethnic public art form.

Tea cultivation, a shared productive activity of the Zhuang and Han peoples, forms the environmental foundation for integration. This productive commonality enables the encounter of the two laboring bodies. First, dancers' basic movements were adjusted through long-term farming practices, generating new functions in public spaces such as fairs and festivals. Behavioral changes and continuous adaptation in performances in turn require further physical adjustment. Second, dancers' cognition shifted from "labor identification" to "artistic performance", and identity expanded from "ethnic laborer" to "fair performer". Tea-Picking Dance is a typical example of a dance form adapting to local conditions and environments. Guangxi's rugged tea hills have led to the addition of props such as money whips, rarely seen in Central Plains Han Tea-Picking Dance. Individual cognition of Guangxi Tea-Picking dancers is reshaped in this bidirectional process, deepening the mutual infiltration of forms.

2. Social Function Expansion and Collective Identity in Zhuang-Han Dance Integration

2.1 Huapo Dance: Collaborative Integration of Environment and Individual Behavior Through Dance Culture Expanded by Social Functions

Huapo Dance is an indigenous dance in Guangxi, originally a Zhuang fertility ritual with early movements focusing on parades and upper-body actions, accompanied by strict religious rituals. With the transportation and waterway functions of the nearby Bachu River area, it gradually became closely related to economic development and clan intermarriage (Qin, 2010). Located by the Bachu

River in Pumiao Town, the Huapo Temple transformed its rituals from mysterious religious ceremonies to public festival blessings. Although formed relatively late, Huapo Dance features strong cultural integration, extensively absorbing Han opera stylized movements, costumes, and props, drawing on the "big-headed doll" masks of Central Plains folk customs, employing abundant circular field movements and fan dances, adopting Zhuang folk songs and eight-tone music, and shifting formations from closed circles to theatrical layouts open to outdoor audiences.



Figure 2 Huapo Dance of Pumiao, Guangxi
(Source: Photographed by researchers)

The emergence of Guangxi's fairs, or "gexu" (market gatherings with singing and dancing), as multi-ethnic shared spaces has made life, blessing, and divine protection cross-ethnic public demands. This change constitutes the fundamental driving force for Zhuang-Han cultural integration in Huapo Dance. The dance's role shifted from "ritualists communicating with deities" to "festival performers". This cognitive shift directly promoted the active absorption of

physical skills, leading Huapo performers to adopt stylized movements from Central Plains folk dances. New behavioral patterns are reinforced by the environment in performances, further shaping participants' physical skills and identity. Today, Huapo Dance has integrated cultural and creative products and personal image building, representing a progressive sequence of environmental influence, individual adaptation, and behavioral reconstruction, forming a clear causal chain among triadic interactions.

2.2 Dragon Dance: Commonality of Group Collaboration and Individual Behavior Through Physical Integration Under Cultural Identity

The cultural characteristics of the Incense Dragon Dance stem from cultural identity centered on the worship of the "dragon" totem in traditional Chinese culture, rooted in ancient Chinese beliefs in harmony between heaven, earth, and humanity. People worship dragons to seek "unity of man and nature". Performed in large-scale parades during the Spring Festival—China's most important festival—the Incense Dragon Dance features massive participation and extensive routes. In Guangxi, it additionally carries special significance of exorcising evil spirits and preventing floods. The dance is distinguished by its unique rituals and varied formations and tactics. Originating in Henan Province of the Central Plains over a thousand years ago, the Dragon Dance evolved in Guangxi to incorporate stable lower-body stances and mountain-adapted jumping and dodging movements.

The performance of the Guangxi Incense Dragon Dance requires rigorous collective collaboration, constituting the core field of integration. Villagers from one or more villages rehearse and perform together, integrating the physical techniques of different ethnic groups into a unified rhythmic system, with differences partially eliminated through repeated practice. This represents a cultural convergence process of selection and integration. The integration of Incense Dragon Dance movements reflects the blending and reshaping of Han

and Zhuang cultures. Environmental crises foster collaborative behaviors, which in turn reshape participants' individual cognition and physical techniques.

3. Behavioral Transformation and Comprehensive Mechanisms of Dance Cultural Integration

3.1 Fire Cat Dance: Individual Identification and Behavioral Transformation Through Dual Cultural Superposition of Agricultural Civilization and Animal Mimesis

The Hezhou Fire Cat Dance originates from the Zhuang imitation of cats catching mice, dominated by sneaking, pouncing, and rolling movements with free rhythms. This ritual can be traced back to an ancient sacrificial ceremony in the Central Plains. Guangxi's Fire Cat Dance is likely a dance form formed by the integration of southward-migrating Han people in the Ming Dynasty with local Zhuang folk culture, later evolving into an entertaining folk dance for praying for a bumper grain harvest through ethnic integration. The spread of Fire Cat Dance to Han communities first relies on individual identification: Han artists or children are attracted by the vividness and imitability of the movements when watching Zhuang performances, actively identifying and extracting such movements. After being "decontextualized", the movements are "recontextualized" into new behavioral systems, which further modify the movements to fit the rhythms and styles of new contexts. The daily environment of multi-ethnic coexistence and frequent mutual performance viewing in the Nanling Corridor provides conditions for such cross-vocabulary extraction and transplantation.

The integration of Fire Cat Dance represents a typical model of behavior transplantation driven by individual active identification. Individual aesthetic sensitivity and learning willingness serve as key mediators, behavioral selection and integration as outcomes, and the environment as the opportunity for contact. Triadic reciprocity here demonstrates a "bottom-up" pathway of cultural transmission.

3.2 Comprehensive Overview of the Five Mechanisms

Overall, the five integration models correspond to different "starting points" and "key pathways" in triadic reciprocity. Some originate from individual behavior, such as Qilin Dance and Fire Cat Dance, while others start from the environment, such as Tea-Picking Dance, Huapo Dance, and Dragon Dance. This indicates that cultural integration lacks a single driving direction, but consists of flexible configurations of multiple triadic pathways in different scenarios.

Discussion

First, the explanatory power of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism for cultural integration research. This study introduces Triadic Reciprocal Determinism into the field of ethnic dance integration, verifying its strong explanatory power. The integration of the five dances is not a simple combination of elements, but a result of sustained interaction and dynamic matching among individual cognition and physical habits, behavioral patterns and performance practices, and geographic, economic, and socio-cultural environments. This interaction is cyclical and mutually constraining rather than linear: changes in each dimension trigger adjustments in others, with outcomes feeding back to the starting point to form iterative cultural reproduction. This provides a dynamic perspective beyond static comparisons for cultural integration research.

Second, the dancing body as an active agent plays a critical role in cultural integration. Although this study adopts Triadic Reciprocal Determinism as the core framework, case analysis still shows that the body is an active cultural practitioner. Therefore, cultural integration should not be regarded merely as a process at the macro-vocabulary level, but as a micro-practice accomplished through the specific medium of the dancer’s body as individual behavior within the triadic interactive process.

Third, the internal driving force of dance cultural integration within China's "pluralistic integration" pattern. The study also finds that integration is not completely smooth. The preservation of differences actually prevents integration from turning into full assimilation, maintaining a creative tension of dance that seeks common ground while reserving differences. In other words, the construction of a healthy community does not eliminate differences, but allows their coexistence within a shared practical grammar.

Based on Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Determinism and Cultural Convergence Theory, this paper systematically compares and analyzes the integration of five Zhuang-Han dances in the Nanling Corridor. The research shows that the five dances represent five distinct integration models: symbol reconstruction, cultural interaction, functional transformation, organizational integration, and vocabulary transplantation. Collectively, these models reveal the internal mechanism of dance integration: a sustained triadic interactive cycle among individual cognition and physical habits, group performance practices, and macro-geographic, economic, and socio-cultural environments, with each fine-tuning driving the transformation of cultural boundaries. This study provides a micro-level, embodied perspective for understanding the Pattern of the Pluralistic Integration of the Chinese Nation: integration does not negate diversity, but represents the coexistence and interaction of diversity at the physical level. When the dance vocabularies of Zhuang and Han dancers meet in the same rhythm, they create not only a dance piece, but a new mode of social existence—the core meaning of cultural communication and integration.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, three recommendations are proposed: First, a shift toward "physical techniques" in the intangible cultural heritage protection of dances in the Nanling Corridor. According to the author's field

research, current protection efforts for several dances in Guangxi's Nanling Corridor focus on prop production and written records of historical origins (Wang, 2008), with insufficient attention to the inheritance of "physical techniques" and cross-ethnic understanding. It is recommended that local cultural centers and dance troupes incorporate Qilin Dance, Tea-Picking Dance, and other dances into community activities, with official institutions conducting practical documentation and specifically explaining the ethnic origins of their physical skills, turning them into teachable and perceptible cultural knowledge.

Second, a path to ethnic unity based on "cultural identity". The genealogy and identity of Chinese visual symbols originate from integration and sharing (Ji & Zhou, 2026). Multi-ethnic communities are encouraged to jointly rehearse body-collaborative dances such as Dragon Dance and Qilin Dance during festivals. Practice has proven that dancing together brings ethnic groups closer than mere forums or lectures, representing a practical transformation of "behavior shaping identity" in Triadic Reciprocal Determinism.

Third, interdisciplinary expansion of ethnic dance education. General education courses such as "Ethnic Dance and Cultural Integration" and "Physical Practice and Cross-Cultural Understanding" should be offered in ethnic universities or art institutions. Guided by Triadic Reciprocal Determinism, students can analyze dance cases in the Nanling Corridor to understand the dynamic mechanisms of cultural integration. This not only improves students' theoretical thinking but also enhances their cultural identity.

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