

The Rituals of Exorcising Evil Spirits and Welcoming Good Fortune in Tujia Nuo Opera and Their Social Functions

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Abstract

Drawing on first-hand data from field surveys conducted in Tujia-inhabited areas such as Enshi, Hubei, this paper systematically deconstructs the practical processes and symbolic systems of exorcism and auspiciousness rituals within Nuo opera. The study focuses on elucidating the roles these rituals play in providing psychological comfort, fostering community cohesion, and facilitating cultural transmission within Tujia society. The findings offer theoretical insights and a practical paradigm for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage among ethnic minorities.

Keywords

Tujia Nuo opera; exorcism ritual; auspiciousness ritual; social function; field research.

1. Introduction

Nuo opera is an ancient form of ritual drama that integrates religious veneration with theatrical performance. Originating from primitive religious beliefs, nature worship, and the imperative for ethnic solidarity, it occupies a pivotal place in the cultural systems of China's ethnic minorities. Among these, Tujia Nuo opera stands out for its distinctiveness. Deeply embedded in the ecological and social milieu of the Wuling Mountain region, it primarily employs shamanic Nuo rituals to exorcise demons, summon spirits, heal illnesses, and perform divinations, thereby holding a crucial position within Tujia culture (Li, 2016). The dual themes of exorcising evil and welcoming good fortune are central to Nuo opera rituals. The former aims to eradicate negative forces such as evil spirits, pestilence, and calamities, while the latter focuses on invoking positive outcomes like prosperity, bountiful harvests, and progeny. Together, these elements shape the Tujia worldview and social order.

Existing research on Nuo opera, drawing from multidisciplinary perspectives, has yielded substantial insights. Some scholars, adopting a historical lens, have systematically traced its evolution from Nuo sacrifices, dances, and rituals to contemporary practices. For instance, Zhao (2022) documented the development of Nuo opera from the Shang and Zhou dynasties to the present. Others, focusing on artistic dimensions, have analyzed performance forms and core elements such as Nuo masks and dances. Chen (2020), for example, examined the Nanfeng Nuo dance, arguing for its roots in agricultural culture. Masks are categorized into divine and secular roles, while Nuo dances (e.g., the Bamboo Horse Dance and the Harmony Dance) employ form and movement to invoke blessings and dispel malevolent forces. The male and female Nuo masks symbolize fertility worship. Zhang et al. (2024) studied Zhaotong Nuo masks, classifying them into three types: malevolent deities, righteous gods, and secular figures. Crafted from Dingmu or willow wood through a process of selection, carving, and painting, these masks utilize color and facial features to express character. From a cultural anthropological standpoint, scholars like Xiong (2020) have explored the symbolic systems and cultural identity embedded in Nuo opera. Xiong's study of the Tujia Tusi Nuo dance highlighted how it recreates folk life and reconstructs Tusi history through movement and ritual, thereby sustaining Tujia cultural identity.

In summary, while existing scholarship has extensively covered the historical evolution, artistic forms, and cultural symbolism of Nuo opera, it has generally lacked a holistic analysis of the "exorcism-auspiciousness" ritual as a continuous, interactive process. Specifically, prior studies have not fully illuminated how "exorcism" and "auspiciousness" rituals achieve functional linkage and transformation through specific behaviors, symbols, and participant interactions. Therefore, this article addresses the following core questions: What key social functions do the exorcism and auspiciousness rituals in Tujia Nuo opera serve? How are these functions realized through ritual processes, symbolic structures, and social dynamics?

To address these questions, this study adopts an anthropological perspective, combining literature review, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation to conduct fieldwork on Tujia Nuo opera in Sancha Township, Enshi City, Hubei Province. Sancha Township, a core Tujia settlement, maintains a strict master-apprentice system and an "altar troupe" structure, preserving 25 distinct ritual elements, including the handing over of ritual animals and the opening of the altar. These rituals are characterized by high integrity, minimal commercial influence, and strong typicality, offering a valuable case study.

2. Practical Deconstruction of the Rituals of Exorcism and Auspiciousness in Tujia Nuo Opera

2.1. Process and Interaction of the Exorcism Ceremony

Exorcism rituals, referred to as "driving away evil spirits," "sweeping the hall," or "catching ghosts," are primarily conducted to purge negative influences—such as disasters—from the community, family, or individual lives. In the "Printing" ritual, for example, the afflicted individual invites a Taoist priest to preside. Ritual materials (a whole pig, paper money, an eight-treasure seal box, etc.) are provided by the community, underscoring the collective nature of the event.

As the ritual commences, the Taoist priest and Dharma master, robed in long garments, wield a sword, the "Thunder Dusi" seal, and a pig's heart, respectively. They coordinate with the drummer's gong and drum accompaniment and chanting. By narrating the mythical "origins" of the seal, they establish ritual authority, consecrate the sacred space, and guide the petitioner and audience into a ritual state.

During the core "printing" phase, the Taoist priest stamps the seal sequentially on the pig's mouth, ears, tail, paws, ribs, and other parts. The accompanying lyrics explicate the intent—to drive away diseases, thieves, fires, and other misfortunes, while invoking wealth and health. The petitioner participates through a "contract" ritual, dividing the "contract money" (half burned as an offering to the gods, half venerated for the ancestors) and performing divination to confirm auspicious outcomes. This transforms the human-deity supplication into a binding contractual relationship, reinforcing psychological certainty.

The ceremony concludes with the Taoist priest standing outside the entrance, holding a knife and chanting incantations to expel evil and welcome blessings. The altar is then formally closed, signifying the successful completion of the ritual and the transformation from impurity to purity.

2.2. Process and Interaction of the Welcoming Good Fortune Ceremony

The Welcoming Good Fortune ceremony, also known as "fulfilling a vow" or "praying for blessings," centers on giving thanks for divine favor and seeking future prosperity. It is characterized by broader participation and a more celebratory atmosphere.

Taking the typical "Huan Yang Nuo" performance as an example, the auspicious ceremony begins with altar construction and deity worship. The altar features figures of the Nuo Father and Nuo Mother. A Nuo master appears holding a banner adorned with the yin-yang symbol.

Four dancers, wearing fierce masks and uniform costumes, perform synchronized movements—toes pointed outward, feet raised sideways—to the rhythm of drums. This creates a sacred atmosphere centered around the Nuo master, expressing communal gratitude. Subsequently, the ritual progresses to inviting the gods to bestow blessings. The Nuo masters lead the chanting, while dancers respond, simulating a dialogue between humans and deities. Dancers pair up, standing back-to-back and patrolling the four directions, symbolically purifying the ritual space of distractions. Finally, they unite in a collective prayer gesture, merging individual wishes into a unified appeal.

During the sacrifice and entertainment of the gods, the Nuo master blows a horn and distributes four red flags to the dancers, symbolizing farming (east), offspring (south), health (west), and wealth (north). The dancers hold the flags and bow to the Nuo master. Community members are invited to "touch the flags" to receive blessings, reflecting the Tujia value of "shared welfare."

The ceremony concludes with the burning of paper offerings to send off the deities: dancers appear holding knives and circle the performance area. The Nuo master replaces unlit torches with lamps, ignites them, and directs the flames toward the dancers, who coordinate their movements accordingly, ending the ritual with a definitive gesture.

3. The Social Functions of Exorcism and Auspiciousness Rituals

Tujia Nuo opera is not a static cultural relic but a dynamic practice deeply embedded in community life. Building on the analysis of the exorcism and auspiciousness rituals in Sancha Nuo opera, this section explores how these rituals help individuals cope with uncertainty, foster community integration, and ensure the intergenerational transmission of ethnic culture, thereby revealing the sources of their enduring vitality.

3.1. Psychological Comfort Function

From the perspective of anthropological functionalism, ritual serves as a crucial cultural mechanism for helping individuals and communities manage existential anxieties and psychological distress. Malinowski argued that when faced with uncertainties (e.g., illness, disaster), ritual—through standardized sacred actions—provides explanations and coping frameworks that transcend rational cognition, thereby alleviating fear and restoring psychological equilibrium (Malinowski, 1925).

The exorcism and auspiciousness rituals of Nuo opera represent collective actions through which the Tujia people confront risks and articulate hopes in daily life. Driven by mundane needs and reverence for the divine, individuals project their aspirations for a better life onto the Nuo gods, seeking protection for favorable weather, freedom from disease and disaster, and overall well-being (Li, 2016).

Tujia Nuo operas, where vows are fulfilled and performances thank the deities, clearly demonstrate this psychological comfort. Examples include the Sancha Nuo operas "Returning to the Body" and "Printing." In "Returning to the Body," four performers hold red flags symbolizing east (farming), south (offspring), west (health), and north (wealth), bowing to the Nuo master. Community members then "touch the flags" (lightly touching the edges) to receive blessings, a practice believed to secure divine favor, fulfill aspirations, and provide psychological solace. Furthermore, Nuo mask craftsman Wang Rubin (interviewed July 2025) described the "Opening the Red Mountain" ritual—involving a dagger pressed against a parent's forehead to help a child overcome tribulations. Though graphic, this ritual reflects a deep-seated belief in "taking on children's hardships" and offers profound psychological relief upon completion.

3.2. Community Cohesion Function

French sociologist Émile Durkheim proposed that collective rituals are pivotal moments for the periodic reinforcement and reproduction of society. During rituals, members strengthen social bonds through shared actions, focus, and emotional experiences, generating a state of "collective effervescence." Through this process, they reaffirm and internalize shared values and moral norms, thereby achieving social integration and cohesion (Durkheim, 1915).

Tujia Nuo opera serves not only as a mechanism for individual psychological comfort but also, in line with the above principles, as a vehicle for community cohesion. As a traditional public ritual, Nuo opera is typically staged in communal spaces like village squares or ancestral halls, mobilizing a wide range of participants—from shamans and performers to ordinary villagers. On these occasions, the village community reunites, fostering strong emotional resonance and collective order. Many villagers, including migrant workers, return home specifically for Nuo opera performances to avoid missing this annual collective event; otherwise, they would "feel unsettled all year" (Zhang, 2025). This high level of participation indicates that Nuo opera has transcended mere religious performance to become a core mechanism for maintaining community identity and emotional bonds.

During the rituals, community members are not passive observers but active participants. For instance, in the "Sharing Blessings" segment of "Huan Yang Nuo," performers hold the four symbolic red flags, circle the stage, exchange greetings with the Nuo master, and invite the audience to "touch the flags." This interaction, believed to convey "blessings," symbolizes that well-being is a communal resource, not merely an individual gain. It embodies a logic of "redistributing welfare," transforming sacred blessings into shared communal assets and intertwining religious supplication with social solidarity.

Nuo opera also fosters cohesion through shared emotional experiences. The tense atmosphere of exorcising evil and epidemic spirits, contrasted with the joyous scenes of praying for blessings, allows audiences to release pent-up emotions within a shared rhythmic and contextual framework, achieving collective psychological compensation. The carnivalesque aspects of the ritual—such as comic banter, humorous gestures, and exaggerated masks—further dissolve everyday tensions and social barriers, creating an atmosphere of collective joy. This alternation between "shared laughter" and "shared tension" deepens emotional connections among neighbors and cultivates trust and cooperation within the village.

3.3. Cultural Inheritance Function

Cultural inheritance involves not merely the transmission of knowledge and skills, but also the embodiment and internalization of social structures and values through practice. Bourdieu's "theory of practice" emphasizes that culture is embedded into the "habitus" of actors through daily, repetitive practices (such as rituals), thereby achieving intergenerational continuity (Bourdieu, 1972). As a highly integrated cultural practice, Nuo opera is precisely the process through which the Tujia people's cosmology, historical memory, and social ethics are transformed into tangible, participatory collective actions and symbolic behaviors.

As a cultural form integrating religion, art, and lived experience, Tujia Nuo opera plays a significant role in education and cultural preservation. Nuo repertoires cover diverse themes including production, marriage, and ancestor worship, authentically reflecting the Tujia people's historical experiences and spiritual pursuits. For example, in "Printing," the lyrics explicitly state: "Drive out measles, plague, and smallpox; drive out thieves and villains." This not only expresses a desire to eliminate disease and disaster but also conveys, through ritualized communication, the maintenance of social order and the promotion of integrity and diligence. Similarly, the lyrics of "Returning to the Sun Nuo" call for "favorable weather and abundant harvests," incorporating prayers for agricultural prosperity and natural harmony

into the ritual core, allowing audiences to absorb ethnic values subtly through entertainment and aesthetic engagement.

Furthermore, the recurring performance of Nuo opera during festivals and its role in shaping collective memory are equally vital. Through annual enactments, community members revisit mythological narratives and ancestral achievements, thereby reinforcing cultural identity and historical continuity (Xiong, 2020). This cultural transmission not only maintains ethnic cultural boundaries but also supports the Tujia people in preserving their distinct identity amidst modernization.

4. Conclusion

This article has systematically deconstructed the practices of exorcism and auspiciousness rituals in Tujia Nuo opera and elucidated their multidimensional social functions within contemporary Tujia society. First, these rituals constitute a mutually reinforcing, dialectically unified system. Exorcism employs solemn rites and formal movements to dispel calamitous auras, while auspiciousness utilizes joyful dance and prayer to invoke prosperity and abundance. Though differing in form and atmosphere, they are logically interconnected, completing the religious sequence of "first exorcising evil, then welcoming good fortune." Furthermore, this study proposes that Tujia Nuo opera serves a triple function: providing psychological comfort, fostering community cohesion, and enabling cultural transmission. By alleviating individual anxieties, fulfilling aspirations for a better life, strengthening collective identity, and perpetuating cultural memory, the exorcism and auspiciousness rituals of Tujia Nuo opera have become indispensable mechanisms for the functioning of Tujia society and the continuity of its culture.

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