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Changes in the Cultural Connotation of the Wa Wooden Drum Dance

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ABSTRACT

In Wa wooden drum dance, the human body is a special carrier of Wa's culture. Over the years, the value originally carried in the dance has changed fundamentally, as Wa's culture evolved. For thousands of years, the ethnic traditional worship ritual dance integrated the Wa notions of religion and worship of gods. Wa hunters would go out in groups and manage to bring a captive back to the village, and offer a human head as sacrifice for the wooden drum. They believed that only in this way, the drumbeats were vested with divinity and the mountain gods they honored with the ritual can bless a bumper harvest and ensure the peace and tranquility of the village for the coming year. When the wooden drum is played, people gather around the drum and dance, praying to the gods for protection.

The revival of the dance was driven by the government and the cultural elite, just like the sentence to it was about 80 years ago. Though it served the purpose of introducing the wooden drum dance to the outside world as a local symbol and an explicit form of state presence, as well as to promote the local tourism, cultural attributes and social functions of wooden drum are different from those of the original religious wooden drum rituals.

Keywords: Wa wooden drum dance, culture connotation, culture preservation, cultural attributes.

JEL classification: Other Special Topics

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1. Introduction

In the long course of human history, dance has preserved many cultures and cultural elements that are otherwise unrecorded. 60 years ago, in the deep mountains of Yunnan, China, Wa, the last primitive tribe, still offered human heads to the wooden drum they worshipped as sacrifice, believing that only through the drum beats could they communicate with their gods. And the wooden drum dance, a crucial part of their sacrifice, was the epitome of the Wa people's traditional religious rituals.

Wa wooden drum dance over the years has evolved together with its culture it represents. Over the years, the drum worshiped in traditional times has become a symbol presented to the public today. Today, with the Wa people adopting a modern lifestyle, and with the abolition of human sacrifice, many

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of their traditional rituals were no longer a part of their lives. Still, wooden drum dance is preserved and performed as a symbol of Wa traditions and culture and has attracted tourist from all over the world. Meanwhile, like many traditional ethnic dances, the dance has been heavily modified according to modern taste. All of this demonstrates the influence of social life and dominant discourse on the control over cultural changes.

2. Data and methodology

This essay traced the history of the Wa wooden drum dance, through studying the works of historians, interviewing local community leaders, and conducting onsite field works. It examines the changes in the culture connotation in the Wa wooden drum dance and how these changes dilutes the cultural value of the Wa wooden drum dance, and explores the issues the dance faces as an intangible cultural heritage.

It is important to understand the limitations of this study: it does not provide a solution of the issues identified, but rather opens new avenues for future discussions and research. Recognizing that the evolution of the Wa wooden drum dance from the ancient times to the modern day is an inevitable process, this study opens new avenues for future research on how culture heritage can be better preserved and revitalized.

3. Analysis and findings of the Wa wooden drum dance's history

There is a small town named Ximeng in southwest China. Entirely engulfed by mountains on all sides, the area is characterized by rolling hills and scarcely any flatland. It is populated with an ethnic minority group named the Wa, or *Awa*, as they call themselves, which means "those who live in the mountains."

The Wa observes frequent religious activities, and there are many sacrificial rites each year throughout the stockaded village, such as making water spirits, playing wooden drums, sacrificing with human heads (which has been abolished), cutting oxtails, slaughtering oxen and so on. In times of natural or man-made disasters, all villagers must attend various sacrificial activities to pray for fair weather and well-being. Wooden drums play a significant role in these activities. The ethnic traditional worship rituals represented by the Wooden Drum Dance integrate the Wa notions of religion and worship of gods.

3.1 Wooden drum dance vested with divinity

The Wa population, through hundreds and thousands of years of cultural selection, has conceived a belief that the mountain god created heaven, earth, and man, and the mountains, rivers, earth, and man are all under the mountain god's domain. So, each year during the spring seeding, the leading huntsmen, known as *Bu'ao* in the Wa language, would go out in groups and manage to bring a captive back to the village; their aim would be to use the captive's head as a sacrifice to the wooden drum, because only the sound of drumbeats can conjure up the mountain god for people to worship. Only by offering a human head as sacrifice for the wooden drum can the drum make a noise loud enough. And only the drumbeats vested with divinity can bless a bumper harvest and ensure the peace and tranquility of the village for the coming year. When the wooden drum is played, people gather around the drum and dance, praying to the gods for protection.

The body of the Wa wooden drum is thicker than the body of a strong man; it is made out of red fir tree, a hardwood so thick that it would take a few fully grown men to be able to wrap their arms around the trunk. The heart of the drum is carved into the shape of the female vulva, and it produces a long, booming sound when beaten.

For the Wa people, the wooden drum is not only the *Sigang*, the birthplace of humankind, but also the *Mucao*, which brings salvation. Moreover, it is the incarnation of the strong mother's body, the place where the spirit of the *Muyiji* God, the god of safety that protects the village, lives, and the magic device that endows everything with great fertility. The Wa people regard playing and making wooden drums to be a sacred undertaking. The significance of the wooden drum has gone far beyond the drum itself. The wooden drum has become their religion.

When a new stockaded village emerges, the first thing that the Wa people do is to make wooden drums and build a site to store them. In times of natural or man-made disasters or crop failures, the Wa people will follow their forebears' explanation of this phenomenon—their clansmen have somehow offended the Muyiji God who rests within the wooden drum, and it was the god who caused these calamities to befall them. Because of this, they must perform grand sacrifices for the wooden drum to convey their will to the Muyiji God.

Each beat of the drum is, in itself, a thrilling performance. Animated by the pounding drumbeats, the solemn sacrificial rite could satisfy people's spiritual needs and be extremely cathartic. The intersection of beats of female and male drums embodies the clouds and rain coming together to expedite the growth of all things. It was described (Guo, 2007, page 58) that "villagers of all ages wearing fine ethnic clothing would come out of the village to escort the human head back. They paraded around the village and into the wooden drum house, where they placed the head into the bamboo basket as an offering. Then they would sing and dance around the wooden drum until dawn." Within this rite, the wooden drum is the Muyiji god. The mountain god, also known as Meiji in the Wa language, is the most sacred god. The human head, drumbeats, dancing, music and other aspects are all offerings made by the followers. These are their gifts to the various gods, as only gods are the supreme connoisseurs of art.

Vested as it is with divinity, the wooden drum links the perceivable real world that the Wa live in with the imperceptible world of the gods. In doing so, the psychological prototype of primitive fertility worship becomes a symbol for constructing an imagined ethnic community. Moreover, it becomes a signal, a "magic device" with the power to unify and stabilize the ethnic group. When the beat of the drum gathers all the Wa people together, this ritual also enables the Wa people, who live in harsh natural conditions with precipitous mountains and dense forests, to cohere as a community. It should be noted that in such adverse living conditions, it is extremely hard to survive with the family as the only unit.

3.2 Wooden drum dance, forbidden and forgotten

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the progress of modern civilization has produced enormous changes in the social structure of the Wa Mountain region. In 1953, Chairman Mao Zedong met with the Wa leader in Beijing and suggested the abolition of sacrificing human heads to the wooden drum. Supported by the government, the Wa people began to try various new ways of life. It was stated (Yang, 2015, page 87) that locals started "digging ditches, building irrigation works, and changing the traditional slash-and-burn farming methods." Schools and hospitals were built, and the ancient myth that the wooden drum could be used as a "magical device" to communicate with the gods and promote grain growth lost its force. The seedlings in the paddy fields could still produce ripe grain without the human head sacrifice; children can grow up healthy and strong without making sacrifices to spirits at childbirth. People no longer attach such importance to these ancient traditions that had been passed down for thousands of years.

As the prince of the Awa Mountain and the leader of Wa, Sui Ga met with Chairman Mao Zedong in 1957 and assumed the office of the first magistrate of the Ximeng Wa Autonomous County. It was around 1958 that the human head sacrifice was completely abolished. Wang Lianfang, a veteran cadre of ethnic affairs, recalled that the upper class of Wa and the general Wa population began to discuss the abolition of this tradition after the conversation between Chairman Mao and Yan Kan reached the Awa Mountain. It was described (Wang, 1994, Page 145) that they all agreed that whoever violated the rules would be sentenced to prison, which ended this tradition completely. Another author stated in his recollections of interviewing the witnesses in Ximeng in 1990 (Deng, 1999, Page 145): "Decapitations were banned in 1958. The 'Double Great Leap Forward' meetings were held at that time. The first topic was banning decapitations, so the wooden drum and decapitation were abolished. The wooden drums and wooden drum houses were all burned or discarded. No one dared to eat the melons, beans, and corns grown where the wooden drums were discarded, and they just rotted in the field, according to the description of the local events (Deng, 1999, Page 84). As the human head sacrifice tradition was gradually abandoned, the function of the wooden drum disappeared, and the wooden drums themselves have gradually faded from people's memories. The drums were mostly discarded as unnecessary objects in the stockaded village or even removed by people intentionally. It

was noted (Yang, 2003, Page 17) that strictly speaking, not a single traditional wooden drum has yet been discovered within China.

These narratives indicate that, the wooden drum rite that had been passed down for thousands of years in the Wa Mountain completely disappeared from people's sociocultural lives and their spiritual worlds around the 1950s-1970s. As Alan P. Merriam argued, "Without concepts about music, behavior cannot occur, and without behavior, music sound cannot be produced." As people became more rational and their values were remoulded by ideological changes, the wooden drum lost its original function in the new era, and the bodily movements and sounds attached to the wooden drum culture completely disappeared from the vast mountains.

3.3 The revival of wooden drum dance

In the 1980s, China adopted policies that vigorously facilitated cultural revival in ethnic minority regions. This provided a good environment to awaken the consciousness of ethnic culture and reshape ethnic identities. Both the government and the people took action to revive ethnic culture and initiate folk culture programs, which helped restore the wooden drum dance and other traditional cultures of the Wa people.

The Wooden Drum Dance of Wa has been listed as national intangible cultural heritage since 2006. Today, the wooden drum dance is the most attractive cultural performance for tourists to go and see. Since 2003, as an official ethnic festival, the Wooden Drum Festival of Wa held during China's Labor Day Golden Week is the grandest performance every year.

A show called "Wa Tribe" is performed annually at the Jiangsanmuluo Theatre. Created in 2011, it is an original folk song and dance drama that incorporates the Wa people's myths, legends, farming, festivals, sacrificial rites, and folk customs. It vividly recreates the historical process of how the Wa people evolved from a primitive society, how they revered gods and nature, and how they thrived on the magical and beautiful land of Wa Mountain.

I attended the festival in 2019. With the deep, muffled sound of drumming, a large wooden drum was pushed onto the stage by performers of the troupe. At this moment, several strong Wa youngsters stood around the wooden drum. They beat it and sang, emanating a feeling of mystery and power. The wooden drum dance had a strong religious hue and ethnic quality. When played by the performers, the wooden drums alternated between being soft and mournful, and urgent and powerful, as if conjuring up the wooden drum sacrifices of the Wa stockaded village into the theatre with us. The dance was derived from the original lives and dances of the Wa people, with the professional musicians and dancers learning from elders who had memories of forgotten rite. All the Wa men and women who were present danced to the drumbeats, occasionally letting out short rhythmic shrieks, leading up to the climax of the performance. I marveled that with singing and dancing like this for thousands of years, Wa people have the he song and dance already in their blood.

The whole performance was a brand-new cultural construction of the "Four Unique Cultural Signs of Awa," marked by the "wooden drum, swaying hair, slaughtering oxen, eating game, water wine (*shuijiu*)", designed to achieve the organizer's aim of "displaying the intangible cultural heritage, worshiping the sacred place, revering all things on earth, traveling in the tribes, eating wild game, and enjoying the carnival evening." Evidently, by using the stage narrative of historical memory, the intention of reconstructing the identity of Awa ran through the performance. Through the ear-splitting drumming, the directors highlighted the profound connotations of ethnic culture represented in the wooden drum, and underscored the wooden drum as the symbol that connects the past and the future; meanwhile, under the shining lights, dancers demonstrated their fortitude and might through the sharp, synchronized movement of their powerful bodies. Through the interaction between aesthetic practice and emotional experience, they rediscovered themselves through bodily movements and sounds, and their ethnic identity had been reanimated. The visual and auditory impact of the stage performance satisfied tourists' imagination of exotic lands, fulfilling the aesthetic needs of these outsiders.

3.4 Cultural restoration and alienation

The human body is the reflection of culture. Specifically, different meanings and forms, such as cultural institutions, values and ethics, ethnical identity and fashion concepts, are all projected onto our bodies. The body becomes a special carrier of a person's culture.

It is an unavoidable fact that the value originally carried within the wooden drum has changed fundamentally. The revival was driven by the government and the cultural elite, just like the sentence to it was about 80 years ago. It was done to introduce the wooden drum to the outside world as a local symbol and an explicit form of state presence, as well as to promote the development of Ximeng's tourism economy. Crucially, cultural attributes and social functions of wooden drum-featured entertainment and performances in public cultural spaces are different from those of the original religious wooden drum rituals.

The drum worshiped in traditional times has become a symbol presented to the public today. It and its intangible cultural heritage constitute two different cultural images.

Meanwhile, in order to meet the local government's evaluation criteria for business development, which includes "one hundred people beating one hundred drums, and one thousand people swaying their hair together," the live atmosphere of local performances is often created through high-frequency amplifying equipment to cater to tourists, who have a taste for "lively and fashionable" experiences. Ma has described (2004) that under such circumstances, although the wooden drum dance has attracted tourists from all over the world, it is consumed as a symbol of social culture, and the Wa performers ("insiders") have to please others by being obedient rather than taking a guiding or directing role.

During my two month onsite fieldworks, I interviewed local government officials, scholars, community leaders, and Wa drum dancers, it is clear that tourists ("outsiders") have become the consumers and narrators of the Wa wooden drum dance culture. The wooden drum, the most famous local icon, is now placed in scenic spots, becoming a cultural relic for people to look at and take photos with. By treating the cultural value of music and dance as secondary to sound technology, this suppresses the essence of the music and dance and dilutes its cultural value.

The new elements including sound technology create a space in which the performance is flooded by the sense of spectacle and entertainment, making it hard to distinguish the cultural memories contained within. The strong orientation towards cultural consumption "makes all kinds of unimaginable comforts and opportunities available once the road to modernization is crossed, so that everyone wants to march on this road, and once they start, they can't go back." (Dissanayake, 2004, Page 371).

4. Conclusion and policy implications

Against the backdrop of globalization, ethnic minorities' villages are no longer isolated islands. The traditional rituals and cultures that used to maintain the village communities are constantly evolving as part of the ever-changing social contexts. Various ancient customs regarding wooden drums have been shifted into secular songs and dance performances. In this era that advocates for the preservation of traditions, wooden drum, as an important symbol of Wa ethnic group, has undergone fundamental transformations at both physical and spiritual levels. The cultural values embodied in the wooden drum, therefore, have become an important way to promote the local economic development after the ongoing symbol reconstruction through ages. This demonstrates the influence of social life and dominant discourses on the control over cultural changes. The policy implication of the transformation is clear: a better balance of demands for further social development and the need to preserve important culture heritage, which once lost, would be hard to restore. The optimal point to achieve this balance at the end of the day is up to the people who originally created, and now are evolving with this culture heritage. After all, culture as an independent, unchanging entity, as culture and human life are constantly interacting and shaping each other.

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