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TEACHING KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERPRETATION OF CHARMING XIANGXI STAGE COSTUME SYMBOLS IN ZHANGJIAJIE, HUNAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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Abstract

For centuries, performers in Hunan Province, China, have adorned themselves in the Charming Xiangxi stage costume. The symbols on the costume might stand for things in nature, cultural beliefs, or important events in history. The interpretation of these symbols requires a deep understanding of Chinese culture and history. The objective of this study was to study and present the Knowledge and understanding of the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province, China. Using the methods of literature review and field investigation. The results of this study show that the "Maous Dance" of Tujia nationality, a traditional national dance in Tujia folk activities, is a symbol of spiritual externalization and national identity. It finds its universality and particularity, and its ontological characteristics are compatible with the commonness of the two arts but also have their own uniqueness. Through the "Maous Dance" performance in Charming Xiangxi, we can see that human beings still shine the light of humanity behind the dance sacrifice activities, and the production, living, reproduction, praying for good luck, and eliminating disasters represent the cultural phenomenon of longing for survival and pursuing survival.

Keywords: Interpretation, Charming Xiangxi, Stage Costume Symbols, Maous Dance

1. Introduction

Ernst Cassirer, a well-known German philosopher, once said that man is a symbolic animal because he thought that symbols show what people are like. This shows how typical human life is: people make symbols, use symbols, and rely on symbols to spread ideas and culture (Znuo & Boqian, 2017). Language symbols and non-language symbols are the two types of symbols. Clothing is an example of a non-language symbol. As a cultural phenomenon, clothing shows how people live, what they believe, what their customs are, how they like things to look, and many other things that make up a country's culture. Explore how costume symbols work and realize that stage costumes are different in the way symbols look, how they work, and how the letters are put together (Barthes, 1999). The study of costumes in large-scale tourism performances is unique in that it can reflect the development and change of the story plot, emotional expression, and distinct symbolic properties. Its main purpose is to keep and spread local cultural information through the performing arts, as well as to support the growth of the tourism industry and national culture.

The function of a symbol is to convey meaning. A symbol not only refers to something or a situation, but it also creates an image or concept of something or a situation in the mind of the recipient of the information (Xun, 2011; Weimin & Xioli, 2012) analyzed that clothing, as a



cultural phenomenon, reflects a nation's living conditions, mode of production, beliefs, customs, aesthetic taste, and various cultural attitudes and is the accumulation of national culture (Song, 2007). Believes that to do a good job in the inheritance and development of "Maogus" dance art, we must boldly learn from and absorb contemporary artistic expression techniques. According to Zhang Hui (2013), the perceptual space created by the Charm Xiangxi stage is not simply the combination and superposition of several symbols, but rather the deep memory, imagination, and transformation of national cultural symbols (Xianyong, 2017). Mentioned the use of Xiangxi folk music and dance materials in Charming Xiangxi to show the national spirit of Xiangxi people in the form of songs and dances. Susan Langer (1986) believes that the form of artistic symbols is mainly composed of acoustic elements and that the emotions expressed by their symbols are experienced through hearing (Susan Langer, translated by Liu Daji and Zhou Faxiang, 1986). According to Huang Guan (2020), among the features of "expression" and "meaning" of artistic symbols, the special feature of artistic symbols is emotional expression that inspires aesthetic feeling, including rhythm, tone, line, and layout, as well as three-dimensional modeling, which is precisely the feature of stage clothes.

The stage performance is not only a feast for the eyes and ears but also a feast for the costumes, which have different meanings. It is through formal language that emotions can be communicated. It is an interpretation of the local national spirit and beliefs. With the costume as the performance, the costume symbol of the stage belongs to the comprehensive symbol elements of time and space. Due to a variety of uncertain factors and historical and cultural accumulation, clothing often contains a huge amount of information and amazing symbolic content (Ming, 2011).

Hunan Province is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional practices. Charming Xiangxi is a folk dance and music performance that originated in the western part of Hunan Province, and it is an important representation of the local culture. The performance includes elaborate costumes that are adorned with various symbols, such as animals, flowers, and mythical creatures. These symbols are believed to have special meanings that reflect the local cultural values and beliefs. Despite the significance of these symbols, there is limited study on their interpretation and cultural significance. Therefore, the study problem in this case is to explore and present the knowledge and understanding of the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province, China. By conducting on this topic, we can gain a deeper understanding of the local culture and contribute to the preservation and promotion of traditional practices.

2. Review literature

The development of tourism performance in Zhangjiajie has so far formed a relatively complete industrial system and made remarkable achievements. Performance tourism products have great influence, brand recognition, and rapid development momentum. With its huge scale, superb technical level, and extensive and profound influence, Zhangjiajie's tourism and performing arts are difficult to match by other domestic tourism destinations. It is unique in China and has become the "capital of China's performing arts."

2.1 The origins and development of Zhangjiajie performance

2.1.1 The period from 2000 to 2002 was the initial stage of Zhangjiajie's tourism performance. Zhangjiajie's tourism and performing arts industry began to sprout in the late 1990s, and it was the first to develop tourism and performing arts (Charm Xiangxi) in 2000. "Charm Xiangxi" Company and "Dream Zhangjiajie" Cultural Communication Co., Ltd. were set up successively, specializing in large-scale national song and dance epics and showing

Zhangjiajie's colorful folk culture to the public for the first time. Become the first living fossil in Zhangjiajie history and culture. Since it was in the early stages of the development of tourism performance enterprises and the market had not yet opened, the whole performance was still a small theater performance at that time, the total number of performances of tourism performance was small, the performance venue could only accommodate 200–300 people, and the ticket income was relatively small. Since 2006, the city has had 11 performing arts theaters with nearly 12,000 seats and eight sets of various performing arts programs (Xu et al., 2018; Ong, 2023).

2.1.2 The development period of Zhangjiajie Tourism and Performing Arts from 2003 to 2009. Because of their unique organizational structure, tourism performing arts enterprises showcase local culture to the rest of the world. In 2003, the Charming Xiangxi Grand Theater was named a special performance place of national civilization by the Zhangjiajie municipal and district governments. Meanwhile, relevant travel agencies responded eagerly and promoted the Charming Xiangxi Culture Program as one of the must-miss programs of Zhangjiajie tourism. "Enjoy the beauty of the mountains during the day, and Xiangxi charm at night," travelers began to agree. Under the guidance of the industry and with the support of the government, Tima God Song Cultural Communication Company and Tianmen Fox Fairy Cultural Tourism Industry Co., Ltd. have been established successively. In 2008 and 2009, they launched large-scale original song and dance epics and landscape live musicals, respectively. Their wonderful performances have attracted wide attention from all walks of life. The Zhangjiajie tourism performance market system is becoming increasingly refined. Various types of tourism performance shows integrate the various traditional cultures of Zhangjiajie with different forms of performance, becoming a powerful platform for cultural communication (Zhang & Xiao, 2014; Luo, 2018; Zhao, 2018; Zheng, 2020).

2.1.3 Mature stage of Zhangjiajie Tourism performance from 2010 to now. After more than 20 years of growth and precipitation, Zhangjiajie's tourism performance, tourism services, and basic supporting facilities have long been quite complete. In response to national policies, tourism performing arts enterprises have blossomed everywhere, and large-scale performances such as "Zhangjiajie Folk Song Festival", "Impression of Zhangjiajie", "Misty Rain Zhangjiajie", "Charm Zhangjiajie," and "Zhangjiajie Xilankapi" have appeared one after another. However, with the rising popularity of the tourism performing arts market, tourists' requirements on the quality of tourism performing arts products have been continuously improved. The biggest obstacle to the development of tourism and performing arts enterprises is the lack of novelty and consistency. Some performing arts enterprises have low economic benefits or even losses due to a lack of their own characteristics. In addition, performing arts enterprises have the characteristics of attracting large investment in their early stages (Wang et al., 2012).

2.2 Zhangjiajie's local cultural resources for performance

2.2.1 Folk culture: Zhangjiajie is a multi-ethnic region. In the long process of reproduction, development, and inheritance, these ethnic minorities have formed their own unique customs and habits, including production, and living customs, marriage and funeral customs, belief customs, festivals and festivals, songs and dances, etc. Architecture, clothing, food, sports, entertainment, and folk crafts all reflect the local characteristics of Zhangjiajie. Is the historical tradition and folk customs to undertake. The folk culture of Zhangjiajie has the unique folk characteristics of mulberry planting folk song, mulberry planting stick drum, Tujia waving hand dance, Maous dance, Zhangjiajie Yang Opera, Tujia Sayye Erhu, Zhangjiajie Flower Lantern, Ciliban Dragon Lantern, climbing the knife ladder, going down the fire, crying and marrying, racing year, three stick drum, high huadeng, mulberry planting flower lantern opera,



Tujia pasting the silo custom, Zhangjia brocade skills, etc. A variety of folk customs, folklore, and ancient legends have contributed to the development of national culture while also introducing new growth power to the Zhangjiajie tourism industry.

2.2.2 Ethnic customs: The Rhyme of Soil Wind and Miao represents ethnic customs. The Tujia and Miao people's love for their hometown, life, and hospitality is reproduced through "blessing," "customs," and "marriage customs." Among them, "Praying for Good Luck" selects "Tima Dance", "Saint Mary Taking Fire Dance", "Maogushi Dance", "Drinking Wine Dance," and other original dances, reflecting the long history, totems, sacrifices, and customs of Daxiangxi. "Style" chooses life scenes such as "Beating a father," "Grabbing the Head," "Back to the Mountain," and "Miao Nationality Love Song" to depict Daxiangxi's national temperament. "Marriage Customs" fully demonstrates the unique marriage customs of Tujia and Miao nationality, including crying for marriage, scolding media, pretending to be a mother, greeting the bride, jumping the sedan chair, jumping the screen, rounding marriage, and blessing. The whole program—Miao song, sacrifice song, song without words, love song, marriage song, toast song—flows naturally, so that modern people are fascinated. More than 300 sets of hand-made performance costumes boldly exaggerate the life costumes of the Tujia and Miao ethnic groups, and the actors are decorated with pure silver ornaments, highlighting the beauty of a clear and pleasant rhythm. Furthermore, multimedia and computer sound, light and stage design synthesis, a panoramic open and mobile structure, nine stage sets of Tujia stilted buildings, a replica water wheel, a Tujia brocade combination of virtual and real, and a majestic stage space with a strong visual impact are included.

2.3 The geographical environment and the performance of Zhangjiajie

2.3.1 Zhangjiajie's unique natural features and rustic charm have made it a beautiful scenic work in China and a well-known tourist destination both at home and abroad. Zhangjiajie preserves the Yangtze River basin's original, primitive, and natural scenery from five thousand years ago. The natural landscape has the grandeur of Mount Tai, the beauty of Guilin, the strangeness of Mount Huangshan, and the risk of Mount Huashan. Within the territory of "strange peaks, grotesque rocks, abundant trees, caves grouping together, ravines, streams gurgling, rare birds competing in Xiang, strange flowers, Tibetan peaks, bridges, caves, and lakes in one, a collection of mountains and rivers". It is famous for its unique quartz sand peak forest landform and well-preserved primitive forest ecological environment, attracting numerous tourists from home and abroad to visit. China's key scenic spots and the first batch of 5A level scenic spots, 9 4A level scenic spots, and China's first "World Geoparks" title were awarded in December 2000. Between the city and the scenic spot, which has formed a high-grade highway traffic network, is now the "national civilized scenic spot" which has been listed in the World Natural Heritage list.



Figure 1. The geographical landscape of Zhangjiajie

Source: <https://www.chinadiscovery.com/hunan/zhangjiajie.html> (2023)

2.3.2 Performances at scenic spots: In Zhangjiajie, there are many small and irregular performances at scenic spots, as well as large and irregular tourist performances with original songs and dances with an ecological theme. In Zhangjiajie, the old yard, Savage Valley, and other places, there is a relatively small combination of scenic spots characteristics of the tourism performance, which is characterized by the content and time of the performance being more flexible, and the combination of scenic spots, and more interaction between tourists, but due to site restrictions, it cannot form a certain scale. Tourist performances are mainly jointly organized by local governments, news media, and social enterprises or organizations. The opening ceremony of the first Chinese Folk Song Festival in Sangzhi County, Zhangjiajie, drew a large crowd of tourists. The opening ceremony performance's theme is "Mulberry Planting in the World," with the goal of taking root in the red land, promoting national culture, and passing down mulberry folk songs. It is a combination of folk art and modern art.

3. Methodology

The research methodology for this study involves two main methods: fieldwork and analysis of historical and cultural texts. The researchers will conduct observations and interviews with performers and community members to gain insight into the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols (Zhang et al., 2019).

3.1 Fieldwork: Will conduct observations and interviews with performers and community members to gain insight into the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols.

3.2 Analysis of historical and cultural texts: Researchers will examine historical and cultural texts related to Charming Xiangxi and its costumes to understand the evolution and significance of the symbols.

Table 1. Main sources of data collection

Source of data	Data overview
Questionnaire and interview	Understand the current research status of Zhangjiajie tourism performance.
Direct viewing, on-the-spot experience	
Literature, newspaper, policy, and regulation documents	Academic materials on the Charm of Xiangxi, Tianmen Fox Fairy, Zhangjiajie through the Ages, 4 legal documents, 15 newspapers
Network report	China tourism network, China culture network, Xiangjiang Forum, ZhangJiajie open information network, red net, etc
Program video	Hunan Satellite TV: Yuelu Practice Forum, landscape performance and culture practice
Official website materials	National Tourism Administration, The State Council Information Office
Blog, wechat publicaccount, travel notes	20 Sina blogs, 12 travelograms, The Charm of Xiangxi, Tianmen Fox Fairy, and the Love of Zhangjiajie through the Ages wechat official accounts
books	Books about the Charm of Xiangxi, Tianmen Fox Fairy, Eternal Love of Zhangjiajie and Zhangjiajie Tourism and performing arts

4. Results

Interpretation of charming Xiangxi "Maous Dance" stage dress symbols. Zhangjiajie, as the world's most unique scenic spot, is an indispensable part of the tourism projects. To enjoy the characteristics of the ethnic minority song and dance performances is an indispensable part of the tourism activities. In Zhangjiajie's scenic area, Charming Xiangxi is a song and dance party with local ethnic characteristics. The party costumes depict "Romantic Xiangxi," "Mysterious Xiangxi," "Happy Xiangxi," and "Passionate Xiangxi." The stage costumes of various programs reflect the artistic elements of ethnic minorities (Pengcheng, 2005). Through watching the performance on the stage, the audience can understand the performance, prominence, experience, inclusion, and accumulation of the design features and symbols of the stage costumes, bringing unprecedented sensory stimulation and an intuitive experience to the audience.

4.1 Performance of stage costumes of "Maous Dance"

Symbols are created for the emotional expression of mental activities. Stage costumes are strongly marked and symbolic in shape and color, which can show spiritual activities more abstractly and exaggeratedly, which plays an important role in strengthening the expression of the content and theme of stage art. The costume of the large-scale "Charm Xiangxi" Maous Dance has a clear performance meaning. From the perspective of design style, most of his clothes have a strong personal color, an exaggerated contour shape, and bright colors to give people a strong visual impact. The dancer gives people the most intuitive feeling that there is a kind of "hunter with long hair," the most prominent feature of the dance is the original dress, wearing grass bark, ancient and generous, quite a primitive image, based on the analysis of the design form. The performers' movements are ancient and healthy, and the dialogue requires a strange tone, so that the audience cannot identify and monitor who the performers are, which is the greatest success of the dancers. The dance and drama circles recognize this exaggerated contour shape as the farthest source and living fossil of Chinese dance and drama. From its costumes, props, performance forms, and performance contents, Maous truly reproduces the fishing, hunting, farming production, and life of the Tujia people from the patrilineal society to the Five Dynasties.



Figure 2. The Charming Xiangxi Dance

Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/107308438_399784 (2023)

4.2 The importance of the stage costumes in "Maous Dance"

Charm Xiangxi is not only the memory, display, and dissemination of national cultural symbols but also the transformation and regeneration of those symbols. From the "Maous" performance, we can see that the traditional culture and historical evolution of the Tujia people emerged in the most primitive times from people's wrong and primitive ideas about their own nature and the external nature around them. In the earliest times, the "Maous" had their naked skin covered with thatch, five pieces per person, with bare feet, their faces covered with straw hats, and their heads twisted with straw and palm leaves into singular braids that rose to the sky. The four single braids were played by cattle. In front of the abdomen, a straw with a length of more than one foot and a head wrapped in red cloth were tied. The straw was tied as clothes to show that the ancestors could not weave cloth to make clothes. The bundle in front of the abdomen represented a reproduction tool for human production. In modern stage performances, the costumes are changed into ramie silk, which is strong and beautiful, because the actors' delicate skin and flesh cannot resist the rough grass, and the performance no longer drops grass leaves while jumping. This is also the most representative symbol of ethnic minority costume characteristics in "Charming Xiangxi," which introduces the audience to a wide range of national aesthetics and highlights national cultural imagination. More importantly, various national cultures are always in the process of varying between fluidity and stability. Therefore, to understand and spread a national culture, we should not only actively seek out national cultural symbols but also pay attention to the regeneration ability of national cultural symbols in the new era context. This process is still vaguely visible in the Tujia sacrificial performance.



Figure 3. Folk "Maous" dance

Source: <https://kknews.cc/zh-sg/history/rqv2q64.html> (2023)

4.3 The experience of the stage costumes of "Maous Dance"

Nature is embodied in the process of expressing the symbol and the people with whom it comes into contact, reflecting their own spiritual activities. Stage costumes contribute to experiential expression. Costumes are worn on actors, who are the subjects of communication with the audience (Xun, 2011). The center of art is people, and the purpose of reproducing the material environment on stage is to shape the image of the characters in the play. Stage costumes attached to people have the characteristic of fluidity, which makes communication between actors and audiences more convenient. It can, to some extent, compensate for the limitations of stage design and lighting design in terms of fluidity. From the "Charm Xiangxi" large party costume analysis, the designer has made the costume with a humanized natural

reproduction function. From the perspective of costume display in the performance of "Maous Dance", the narration of costume symbols reflects the characteristics of formalization. The form of clothing symbols, namely the form of what the eyes see, is also the visibility of the eyes. The proportion, color, and contour of objective objects are directly appealing to the eyes so that people can perceive the sacred image, which is the prerequisite for the form of clothing to become noble and sacred. Ancient beliefs such as nature worship, totem worship, and ancestor god worship are incorporated into the performance of "Maous Dance". All kinds of spiritual symbols left over from ancient times, such as nature worship, totem worship, and ancestor god worship, have been preserved. Its witchcraft words, sorcery, sorcery song, sorcery mantra, and sorcery all provide precious "living fossils" for people to study the religious sources of ancient China.

4.4 The stage costumes of "Maous Dance" are intuitive and inclusive

In the aspect of inclusion, the symbol itself has a perceptual form of living fact that stays in the brain for a long time and makes people repeat the aftertaste. Zhang Xianrong (Xianrong, 2004) believed that stage costumes could reflect characters' personalities and plot conflicts, which shared the symbolic content carried by stage design. Especially for the dance costume in the stage costume, the characteristics of dance performance make the stage design impossible to be too complicated, so we should emphasize the performance of the content and theme in the stage costume. These multi-modal body dynamics at work can also make people fully believe in many artistic aspects on today's stage and understand the relationship between the situation of "Maous" dance and the origin of local folk. When they "look," the audience is confronted with the color, shape, and beauty of the dress and decides whether it is good or bad based on subjective initiative. Therefore, "seeing" is more intuitive than feeling, which is more convenient for the audience's first vision. Intuit ionization has evolved into a key feature of costume symbols.

4.5 A large collection of "Maous Dance" stage costumes

The original "Maous" dance has a rich cultural landscape and a distinct style in the Tujia people's treasure house of folk art. After studying the Tujia dance "Maous", Mr. Dong Luo believed that the Tujia ancestors should be Ba people. They worshipped and celebrated by singing and dancing, and their dances and ballads were inseparable, even like dramas. "Maous" dance is an essential part of Tujia traditional festivals. Due to the characteristics of the local region, the spread of customs and habits, and the long history of religious belief, the Tujia people in western Hunan have produced colorful festival activities. These festivals have always formed an irrevocable bond with "Maous" dance in any form. Maous is one of the most primitive dances of the Tujia people, which can be traced back to the early stages of patrilineal society and carries the strong consciousness of ancestor worship of the Tujia people. The Tujia people's urgent desire to control their mysterious power, to strengthen their religious belief, and to convey the firm faith Tujia people should have in the face of natural disasters and diseases are all expressed in the performance. As a traditional dance of the Tujia people, Maous inspires generations because of the faith and spirit it carries and plays a positive role in coordinating, supporting, and promoting the social progress of the Tujia people.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study on the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province, China, show that the "Maous Dance" of Tujia nationality is a symbol of spiritual externalization and national identity. This finding is consistent with the study by Lian et al. (2017), which explored the cultural connotation and artistry of the "Maogusi" dance of Tujia ethnic group in Xiangxi. Lian et al. (2017) also found

that the "Maogusi" dance embodies the unique cultural characteristics of Tujia ethnic group and reflects the spiritual world of Tujia people. Moreover, the present study suggests that the symbols on the Charming Xiangxi stage costume may represent things in nature, cultural beliefs, or important events in history, which is consistent with the study by Li et al. (2018) on the symbolism and cultural connotation of traditional Chinese clothing. Li et al. (2018) found that traditional Chinese clothing is imbued with deep cultural meaning and reflects the values, beliefs, and history of Chinese civilization.

However, the present study's focus on the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols is different from the studies by Guo et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2020), which investigated the cultural significance of Chinese traditional costumes in general. Guo et al. (2019) explored the historical evolution, regional characteristics, and aesthetic features of Chinese traditional costumes, while Wang et al. (2020) analyzed the cultural connotation, artistic style, and innovation of Chinese traditional costumes. Furthermore, the present study's use of literature review and field investigation as research methods is consistent with the studies by Zhang et al. (2019) and Liu et al. (2020) on cultural heritage protection and tourism development. Zhang et al. (2019) used literature review and field survey to investigate the protection and utilization of cultural heritage resources in Zhangjiajie, while Liu et al. (2020) employed literature review and field study to analyze the impact of tourism development on the intangible cultural heritage in Zhangjiajie.

Overall, the present study's findings are consistent with the results of previous studies on the cultural significance of traditional Chinese costumes, the uniqueness of Tujia ethnic group culture, and the use of literature review and field investigation as research methods. However, the focus on the interpretation of Charming Xiangxi stage costume symbols is unique and contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural richness and diversity of Hunan Province.

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