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The Cultural Value of the Babao Tongling Dance of the Tujia Ethnic Group in Enshi, Hubei

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ABSTRACT

The Babao Tongling Dance is a unique traditional dance of the Tujia ethnic group in Enshi, Hubei, carrying rich cultural connotations and ethnic spirit. With the development of modern society, this intangible cultural heritage faces difficulties in inheritance. This research focuses on systematically exploring the cultural value (historical, artistic, social), current state of inheritance, and protection strategies of the Babao Tongling Dance. The research methodology combines literature analysis and field investigation, obtaining first-hand data through a systematic review of domestic and international literature (15 core documents in total) and field visits to Xuan'en County, Enshi, Hubei, in April 2025. Analysis and discussion indicate that the Babao Tongling Dance possesses significant historical witness value, artistic expressiveness, and social cohesion, but its inheritance faces multiple challenges such as a broken lineage, impact from commercialization, and insufficient policy support. Findings and insights suggest that multiple strategies, including inheritor training, cultural-tourism integration, and digital preservation, are needed to achieve its living inheritance and sustainable development. This study aims to provide theoretical reference and practical pathways for the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Babao Tongling Dance is an ancient sacrificial ritual dance of the Tujia ethnic group in Enshi, Hubei, with profound historical and cultural 底蕴 (foundation). It originated from the Tima ritual of the Tujia people, a form of expression where the Tulaosi (Tujia priest) sings and dances by shaking copper bells during sacrificial activities (Chen Tingliang, 2006; Liu Yihan, 2016).

As a product of the combination of Tujia religious culture and folk art (Huang Baiquan, 2010), the Babao Tongling Dance is not only an art form but also carries the historical, religious, folkloric, and other cultural aspects of the Tujia people, referred to by scholars as a "living dictionary" for studying Tujia culture (Tan Zhiman & Wu Qian, 2018). Its dance movements are rich and varied, such as jumping the three-step gang, stepping on the Taiji diagram, etc. (Chen Ting, 2025), accompanied by the crisp sound of copper bells and unique "Xilankapu" costumes (Zhang Ying, 2015), possessing extremely high aesthetic and research value.

Academic research on the Babao Tongling Dance mainly focuses on three dimensions:

- **Historical Origins**
Scholars have verified that it can be traced back to the Qin and Han dynasties, closely related to Tujia ancestor worship and nature worship (Chen Zhiqian, 2024; Lei Xiang, 2011).
- **Artistic Characteristics**
Including the dance's 本体 (ontology) movements (Wang Dan, 2012), musical rhythm (Li Xue, 2014), and the duality of ritual performance (Tian Xiaoyu, 2018)
- **Inheritance and Protection**
Addressing the problem of modern inheritance 断层 (discontinuity) (Jiao Na, 2009; Zhou Feng, 2023), proposing digital preservation (Tian Weiran, 2020) and cultural-tourism integration strategies (Liu Yang, 2017).

However, existing research still has significant shortcomings: on the one hand, domestic databases contain only 15 relevant documents, of which only 5 are deeply matched (see Methods section); on the other hand, field investigations show that the original form of the Babao Tongling Dance is already endangered (Tian Weiran, 2020; Zhou Feng, 2023). This situation highlights the urgency of research.

Based on literature analysis (including the aforementioned 15 core documents) and field investigation in Xuan'en County, Enshi, in 2025, this paper systematically explores the multidimensional value and protection pathways of the Babao Tongling Dance, aiming to 弥补 (remedy) the fragmented nature of existing research and provide new ideas for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

2. METHODS

This paper adopts a qualitative interactive research method, incorporating literature analysis and field investigation (Chen Tingliang, 2006; Huang Baiquan, 2010). Literature Analysis Method: Through a systematic review of relevant domestic and international literature, 15 Chinese documents directly related to the "Babao Tongling Dance" were retrieved, of which only 5 were deeply matched to the research theme (Zhou Feng, 2023; Chen Zhiqian, 2024; Chen Ting, 2025; Jiao Na, 2009; Liu Yihan, 2016). No relevant research was found in international databases.

Literature analysis shows that existing research mostly focuses on three aspects: historical origins, artistic characteristics, and inheritance protection (Tan Zhiman & Wu Qian, 2018; Tian Weiran, 2020), but lacks systematicity and a holistic discussion of cultural value and protection pathways.

Field Investigation Method: In April 2025, a trip was made to Xuan'en County, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hubei Province, to conduct in-depth interviews and participatory observation with local Tujia folk dance inheritors (Wang Dan, 2012; Li Xue, 2014). Inheritors introduced the origin and ritual background of the Babao Tongling Dance and demonstrated some Tima ritual movements. The investigation found that the dance is currently in a state of severe loss, and its original form is difficult to present completely (Tian Weiran, 2020; Zhou Feng, 2023). The combination of field data and literature analysis provided empirical support and an analytical basis for this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Value of Babao Tongling Dance

The cultural value of the Babao Tongling Dance encompasses historical value, artistic value, and social value. I will detail the cultural value of Babao Tongling from the following three aspects.

– Historical Value

- A Living Witness to Ethnic History

The Babao Tongling Dance originated from the primitive religious sacrificial activities of the Tujia people and is closely related to their ancestor worship and nature worship. According to research, the dance can be traced back to the Qin and Han dynasties, serving as an important form of expression for the Tujia ancestors in rituals such as sacrifices, prayers, and exorcisms.

The copper bells used in the dance symbolize the call of deities, while the steps and movements imitate ancient production and life scenes like hunting and farming, reflecting the early social structure and lifestyle of the Tujia people.

- A Reflection of Ethnic Cultural Integration

The Tujia people have long lived alongside Han, Miao, Dong, and other ethnic groups. Throughout its historical development, the Babao Tongling Dance has absorbed various cultural elements. For example, the decoration of the copper bells and rhythmic variations may have been influenced by ancient Ba-Chu culture, while some dance postures share similarities with the Miao Lusheng dance and the Dong Caitang dance. This cultural blending makes the Babao Tongling Dance an important case for studying multi-ethnic cultural exchange in the Wuling Mountain area.

- The Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage

In 2008, the Babao Tongling Dance was included in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, receiving official recognition of its historical value. The dance's lineage of inheritance, ritual procedures, costumes, and props provide precious materials for studying social changes within the Tujia community. By excavating its historical origins, one can gain a deeper understanding of Tujia religious beliefs, clan systems, and folk customs.

– Artistic Value

- Unique Dance Language

The Babao Tongling Dance uses copper bells as props. Dancers coordinate movements of their wrists, waist, and legs to produce clear and pleasant sounds from the bells, creating a unique rhythmic pattern. The dance movements are vigorous and powerful, yet also contain soft curves, reflecting the Tujia people's character traits of both boldness and delicacy. The steps are rich and varied, including spins, jumps, and stamps, making it highly 观赏性 (visually appealing).

- The Aesthetic Characteristics of Music and Costumes

The dance accompaniment often uses traditional Tujia instruments, such as Daliuzi (gongs and drums) and Dongdongkui (bamboo wind instrument). The music has a bright rhythm, rich with a rustic atmosphere. Dancers wear costumes made from the traditional Tujia brocade "Xilankapu," which are brightly colored with patterns often drawn from natural scenery (like flowers, birds, and animals), possessing a distinct ethnic style. The decoration of the copper bells is also very elaborate, typically consisting of eight bells in a set, symbolizing good fortune and happiness.

- The Combination of Ritual and Performance

The Babao Tongling Dance was initially part of religious rituals but has gradually evolved into a festive performance art over time. In sacrificial contexts, the dance is solemn and dignified, emphasizing communication with deities; whereas in folk activities, it becomes more lively and cheerful, focusing on entertainment and interaction. This dual nature enriches its artistic expressiveness, allowing it to carry both sacred religious connotations and meet the aesthetic needs of the public.

– Social Value

- Enhancing Ethnic Identity and Cultural Confidence

The Babao Tongling Dance is an important symbol of Tujia culture. Through the intergenerational transmission of dance skills, the Tujia people strengthen their sense of identity with their own culture. In the process of modernization, many traditional cultures of ethnic minorities face the risk of disappearance. The inheritance and protection of the Babao Tongling Dance provide a source of cultural confidence for Tujia youth, encouraging them to actively learn and promote their ethnic art.

- Promoting Community Cohesion and Cultural Exchange

In Tujia 聚居区 (communities), the Babao Tongling Dance is often performed during occasions such as the Spring Festival, She Day, weddings, and funerals, becoming an important part of community activities. The collective nature of the dance (usually performed by multiple people) enhances the spirit of cooperation within the group. Furthermore, with the development of tourism, the Babao Tongling Dance, as a local cultural 名片 (name card), attracts a large number of tourists and promotes cultural exchange between the Tujia and other ethnic groups.

- Promoting Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Rural Revitalization

In recent years, Hubei Province has incorporated the Babao Tongling Dance into its intangible cultural heritage protection projects, promoting its inheritance by establishing training centers and holding cultural festivals.

Simultaneously, local governments have combined dance performances with rural tourism, developing cultural and creative products (such as copper bell crafts and ethnic costumes), injecting vitality into the local economy. This "intangible cultural heritage + tourism" model not only protects traditional culture but also provides new ideas for rural revitalization.

3.2. Current State of Inheritance

The Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hubei is one of the main areas where the Babao Tongling Dance is 流传 (passed down). As a national intangible cultural heritage, the dance still has some degree of living inheritance locally. However, there is currently a 断层 (discontinuity) among inheritors who can perform the authentic Babao Tongling Dance. What we can see now is often a modern dance adapted in various ways, rather than the original traditional Babao Tongling Dance.

Currently, the inheritance of the Babao Tongling Dance mainly exhibits the following characteristics:

- Inheritance relies mainly on master-apprentice system, but inheritors are severely aging.

The inheritance of the Babao Tongling Dance primarily relies on oral transmission and physical demonstration, passed down from older artists (such as the "Tima," Tujia priests) to the younger generation. However, most inheritors who master the complete dance skills are now advanced in age.

There are currently only two recognized inheritors left, and there are currently no key inheritors proficient in performing the dance, leading to a broken lineage in skill transmission. Although local governments have designated some Tima intangible cultural heritage inheritors, the willingness of the younger generation to learn is low, resulting in a lack of continuity between generations in the inheritance 队伍 (ranks).

- Performance occasions gradually 倾斜 (tilting) towards tourist displays.

Traditionally, the Babao Tongling Dance was performed mainly in folk activities such as sacrifices, festivals, weddings, and funerals, possessing sacredness and ritual 感 (sense). However, with social changes, its performance settings have gradually shifted to commercial occasions like tourist spots and cultural festivals. Although this transition 扩大了 (expands) the dissemination range of the dance, it may also lead to the dilution of its cultural 内涵 (connotations), turning it into mere "performance programs" rather than "cultural rituals."

- Combination of school education and community inheritance.

In recent years, some primary and secondary schools 以及 (and) universities in Xuan'en County, Enshi, have incorporated the Babao Tongling Dance into school-based curricula or club activities, cultivating the interest of the younger generation through dance teaching.

Meanwhile, some communities and cultural centers regularly hold training classes to encourage public participation in learning. This model has somewhat alleviated the inheritance crisis, but systematic efforts are still insufficient.

3.3. Inheritance Challenges

- Impact of modern lifestyle insufficient interest among the younger generation.
With the acceleration of urbanization, the younger generation of Tujia people tends to be more exposed to popular culture, showing reduced interest in traditional dance. Many young people migrate for work, leading to a shrinkage of the local cultural 传承 (inheritance) group. Furthermore, learning the Babao Tongling Dance requires a long 周期 (cycle), complex movements, and long-term practice, which also discourages some potential learners.
- Commercialization and "performativization of intangible heritage" weaken cultural connotations.
Driven by the tourism economy, the Babao Tongling Dance is often simplified into performance items to attract tourists, its original sacrificial function and cultural significance gradually fading. Some performers, catering to market demands, make arbitrary adaptations to the dance, leading to distortion of traditional skills. This excessive commercialization may cause the Babao Tongling Dance to lose its authenticity.
- Insufficient funding and policy support.
Although the Babao Tongling Dance is listed as a national intangible cultural heritage, it still faces problems such as funding shortages and inadequate policy implementation at the grassroots protection level. Some inheritors lack stable economic support, making it difficult for them to devote themselves fully to teaching. Simultaneously, intangible cultural heritage protection work often relies on short-term projects, lacking long-term mechanisms.
- Lag in academic research and digital documentation.
Currently, there is relatively little systematic research on the Babao Tongling Dance. Its historical origins, movement system, musical rhythm, etc., have not yet been fully sorted out. Additionally, the application of digital preservation methods (such as motion capture, video recording) is insufficient, resulting in some endangered skills not being effectively preserved.

3.4. Discussion on Protection Strategies

- Strengthen inheritor training and establish incentive mechanisms.
Set up special funds to provide living allowances and teaching funds for intangible cultural heritage inheritors, encouraging them to take apprentices and teach skills. Carry out "Intangible Cultural Heritage Enters Campus" activities, offering Babao Tongling Dance courses in primary and secondary schools and universities to cultivate young inheritors. Organize dance competitions and exhibition events to increase social attention and enhance the sense of honor among learners.
- Balance protection and development, maintain cultural authenticity.
In tourism development, emphasize the cultural connotations of the Babao Tongling Dance and avoid excessive commercialization. "Original ecology performance areas" can be established to showcase its traditional ritual form. Encourage the development of cultural and creative products (e.g., copper bell crafts, dance animations), but ensure core skills are not altered.

- Improve policy support and multi-party collaboration.
Local governments should formulate long-term intangible cultural heritage protection plans, increase capital investment, and establish supervision mechanisms to ensure policy implementation. Promote a cooperation model of "Government + University + Community + Enterprise," for example, collaborating with universities to establish intangible cultural heritage research centers, and partnering with enterprises to develop cultural tourism projects.
- Advance digital preservation and academic research.
Utilize motion capture technology, 3D modeling, and other means to record the complete movement system of the Babao Tongling Dance, establishing a digital archive. Organize experts and scholars to conduct systematic research on the dance's history, music, costumes, etc., and publish related works and audiovisual materials.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, the current situation of the Babao Tongling Dance is not optimistic, even to the point where this dance form risks disappearing. The protection and inheritance of the Babao Tongling Dance require multi-dimensional and systematic efforts. It is necessary both to excavate its profound cultural value and to address the inheritance challenges with modern means, enabling it to (radiate) new vitality in contemporary society.

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