

Cultural Representations of Chizhou Nuo and Villagers' Belief Systems from a Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract

Chizhou Nuo, an important ritual performance tradition in China, carries social functions of blessing, protection, moral regulation, and community cohesion. Despite Chizhou Nuo Opera's recognized social functions, how its symbolic systems resist erosion and sustain spiritual relevance in villagers' daily life amid modernization—especially via a semiotic–anthropological lens—remains underexamined. This study applied a semiotic framework, combined with anthropological and folkloristic approaches, to examine how cultural representations of Nuo shape villagers' belief systems and social practices. Based on fieldwork in specific villages in Chizhou, Anhui Province, along with interviews and participant observation, the research demonstrated that masks, dances, chants, and ritual spaces together form a multilayered system of signs. These representations not only transmit supernatural beliefs and cultural norms but also reinforce emotional expression and the reproduction of social relations. The research highlighted the active agency of villagers: as interpreters of signs, they actively transform ritual symbols into religious identification and emotional reliance, thereby sustaining faith, regulating emotion, and strengthening community bonds. The study contributes to heritage research by integrating semiotic analysis with folklore perspectives, foregrounding the agency of interpreters, and highlighting the role of emotions and social adaptation within ritual practices.

Keywords: Chizhou Nuo; Semiotics; Chinese Folk Religion; Ritual Communication; Emotional Regulation; Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Nuo culture, a composite of Chinese folk religion and ritual performance, embodies profound historical memory and symbolic meaning, whose pluralism is widely recognized. As a local variant, Chizhou Nuo originated from ancient sacrificial–exorcistic rites, evolving over centuries into an integrated ritual performance practice combining masks, dance, and music. It is both a core of regional folklore and a key medium for understanding rural China’s spiritual structure and cultural psychology. With global spread of intangible heritage protection, Chizhou Nuo has become an academic and policy focus. Its unique rituality and symbolic system sustain vitality amid social transformation, exemplifying tradition–contemporary interaction. However, existing studies focus on origins, ritual structure, or mask art, with insufficient attention to how it sustains spiritual influence via semiotic mechanisms in modernization and villagers’ agency—this is the gap this study addresses.

Existing Nuo culture research focuses on origin, ritual structure, mask art, and communal functions, with scholars agreeing it is more than a religious ceremony—it is a symbolic mechanism for rural social order and collective identity. As a Tang–Song (960–1279) local variant, Chizhou Nuo (in Guichi, Chizhou, Anhui, and surrounding villages) has a mask–ritual symbolic system that externalizes villagers’ beliefs and strengthens communal cohesion. It entered China’s first national intangible heritage list in 2006 and has since been integrated into state cultural protection. Yet, amid modernization and rural transformation, Chizhou Nuo faces pressures: declining youth participation weakens intergenerational transmission, while tourism and commercialization recontextualize some elements as cultural commodities. This duality creates opportunities and challenges, prompting the question: how to understand its contemporary significance while preserving ritual essence?

Grounded in structural semiotics and cultural reproduction theory, this study highlights Chizhou Nuo’s value: interplay of its masks, dance, etc., materializes Peirce’s triadic sign–based meaning–making, offering a semiotic lens to rural spiritual order and cultural reproduction. As a mirror of southern rural clan structures, beliefs, and collective psychology, its comparison with global masked rituals (e.g., Japanese Noh) enriches cross–cultural studies. Through Chizhou fieldwork (including participant observation and interviews), it constructs a “symbolic representation–belief interpretation–social function” framework, addressing the gap in linking “semiotic mechanisms–villagers’ agency–modernity adaptation.” In sum, this research, via a

semiotic–anthropological lens, explores its symbolic system and social functions to reveal how ritual symbolism sustains rural collective identity and negotiates modernity.

Research Objectives

This study aims to systematically examine the representational mechanisms and social functions of Chizhou Nuo culture from a semiotic perspective.

1.To reveal how the ritual and performative forms of Chizhou Nuo—including masks, dance, chants, and codified gestures—construct a symbolic system that communicates both religious and social meanings.

2.To investigate the role of villagers as interpreters of these symbols, examining how their participation allows them to decode and reproduce ritual meanings, thus generating religious identity and emotional attachment.

3.To explore how symbolic interaction within Nuo practices contributes to sustaining belief, regulating emotion, and adapting to social life, and to demonstrate how shared symbolic systems provide psychological comfort and reinforce communal order.

Through these three objectives, the study develops a systematic analytical framework to understand the construction, interpretation, and functional logic of symbolic systems in Chizhou Nuo culture, offering insights into its religious significance and social value.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Nuo culture and ritual traditions increasingly focuses on semiotics, cultural representation, and belief studies. This section reviews three strands—ritual/symbols, belief/social functions, and ICH/contemporary transformations—with this tripartite split reflecting Nuo studies’ multi-layered focus, integrating semiotic, anthropological, and heritage perspectives.

In ritual and symbol studies, masks, gestures, and spatial arrangements in rituals are semiotic agents that via repetition reinforce collective memory and generate shared meanings (Helbo, 2016). According to Peirce’s triadic semiotic framework, these act as “iconic signs” (e.g., ferocious masks signifying exorcism, resembling their referents) and “symbolic signs” (e.g., specific gestures for blessings via communal convention). Western scholars use universal ritual theories to analyze masks’ authoritative symbolism (Magalhães & Martins, 2023), while Chinese ethnographies focus on local contexts—Nuo masks’ sanctity comes from both the signs themselves and villagers’ dynamic interpretation and intergenerational transmission in annual rituals.

Beyond symbolic analysis, recent studies highlight ritual belief's social integrative functions. Ritual anthropology sees rituals as both faith expressions and core social cohesion mechanisms—rural ceremonies, in particular, are key to community bonding, emotional release, and order maintenance (Layugan, 2024). Psychologically, “social drama” theory shows ritual interactions (e.g., Nuo masks' sacredness, collective chants' rhythm) trigger “communitas,” turning individual beliefs into shared emotions to strengthen communal bonds. Chizhou Nuo fieldwork confirms this: through participation, observation, and symbolic interaction, villagers elevate personal belief to collective identity, making rituals serve both psychological adjustment and social integration. Amid socio-cultural changes, related studies show Nuo performances sustain local communities' value consensus and identity through this dual emotion-symbol linkage (Wu, 2023).

In ICH preservation and contemporary transformation, scholars argue safeguarding Nuo culture needs more than formal protection—it requires preserving symbolic systems and community participation. The “living heritage” concept—prioritizing participation and continuity over static preservation—highlights education, community involvement, and institutions for sustaining ritual vitality (Li & Phanlukthao, 2024). For traditional ritual cultures, contemporary re-representations (e.g., ritual symbols in festivals/events) are key to continuity. Scholars note these re-representations—especially in tourism—often balance cultural authenticity and adaptive vitality. Though symbolic meanings may shift in new contexts, they shouldn't fully detach from their foundational religious roots (Zhao, 2022).

Taken together, these bodies of research provide a strong foundation: ritual and symbolic studies illuminate meaning-making through performance; belief and social function studies clarify villagers' participation and interpretation mechanisms; and ICH research enriches understanding of symbolic practices' contemporary rearticulation. Nevertheless, gaps remain: existing scholarship focuses more on macro festivals/rituals, with limited attention to specific local Nuo cultures like Chizhou's internal symbolic logic; few integrate symbolic representation, villagers' belief orientations, and ritual social functions; and symbolic signification, emotional experience, and social adaptation are rarely examined as interrelated processes. This study addresses these gaps by centering Chizhou Nuo and constructing an integrated semiotic framework linking symbolic representation, belief formation, and social adaptation. Distinct from descriptive ethnography, it integrates semiotic and cultural representation theories to systematically explore its symbolic system, belief mechanisms, and contemporary recontextualization—filling the regional and theoretical gap while aligning with the study's objectives.

Research Methodology

This study focuses on Nuo culture in the Chizhou region, aiming to analyze its symbolic mechanisms and the villagers' belief orientations from a semiotic perspective. The research population includes villages in Chizhou where Nuo rituals are still practiced, while the sample is drawn from two representative villages. These sites were selected for their cultural authenticity and their ability to reflect villagers' lived experiences of ritual participation.

In terms of research design, the study adopts a qualitative approach that combines three complementary methods: literature analysis, field observation, and in-depth interviews. Literature analysis provides the theoretical and semiotic background for the study. Field observation focuses on documenting symbolic elements of the rituals, such as masks, dances, chants, and spatial arrangements. In-depth interviews with villagers, performers, and ritual organizers allow for the collection of narratives on symbolic interpretation and the articulation of faith and emotional attachment.

Based on triadic theory of semiotics, masks, music, actions, and ritual spaces are treated as "sign vehicles," while deities, ancestors, or supernatural powers represent the "objects" of the signs. Villagers act as "interpreters," without whose recognition the symbolic system cannot function meaningfully (Peirce, 1998). By analyzing this triadic relationship, the study explores how cultural representations and belief reproduction occur within ritual and social interaction. Interviews and observations also enrich the understanding of how villagers' faith and emotions are reinforced through these symbolic practices.

To illustrate the research logic, a conceptual framework has been developed (Table 1). This framework outlines the pathway from symbolic forms to belief interpretation and social functions, aligning with the three research objectives.

Table 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Level	Research Focus	Research Question Orientation
Symbolic Level	Ritual elements (masks, dances, music, spatial setting)	How do these symbols constitute a system of cultural representation?
Interpretive Level	Villagers' participation and interpretation (watching, praying, responding)	How do villagers confirm their beliefs through the interpretation of symbols?
Social Level	Belief and order (cohesion, centripetal force, sense of community)	How does Chizhou Nuo sustain collective belief and social order in contemporary society?

Research Results

1. Rituals and Performance Forms

As a cultural form that integrates both religious and theatrical attributes, the essence of Chizhou Nuo lies in its ritualized performance process. The ritual is not merely a repetition of religious activities but also a generative mechanism of social order and cultural meaning. Within the practice of Nuo, masks, dances, chants, music, and props together constitute a symbolic system that is activated and reproduced through ritual. According to the triadic model of semiotics, the symbolic system of Nuo consists of the representamen (such as masks and dance movements), the object (such as deities and ancestral images), and the interpreter (villagers' beliefs and interpretations).

The Nuo mask is not only a visual image but also the core carrier of the representamen. As the signifier, its carvings, colors, and exaggerated expressions convey specific religious symbolism, while the signified corresponds to deities, ancestors, or natural forces (Winkelman, 2023). When participating in rituals, villagers regard the mask as the incarnation of deities, thereby endowing it with sacredness and transcendence. Thus, the mask is not merely an artistic object but a medium connecting human and divine relationships.

Table 2 Analysis of Visual Imagery of Typical Chizhou Nuo Masks

Category	Deities		Fierce Deities		Secular Figures	
Name	Guandi	Tudigong	Bao Gong	Zhang Long	Positive	Comic
	(Lord Guan)	(Earth God)	(Judge Bao)		Characters	Characters
					Liu Wenlong	Song Zhong
Mask						
Identifiable Elements	Black warrior headscarf with golden wings, red face with long beard, phoenix eyes and silkworm brows	Black-and-red official turban, yellow face with long beard, thick brows, fine eyes, dense wrinkles	Black official cap, black face with long beard, crescent-shaped mark on forehead	Horns, helmeted crown, upright ears, fiery brows, glaring eyes, bull's nose, fangs	Scholar's headscarf, yellow hat, yellow face without beard	Black gauze hat with golden trim, narrow eyes, sharp nose, thin lips
Expression	Raised brows and slanted eyes, upturned mouth, dignified yet benevolent demeanor	Arched brows, smiling eyes, teeth slightly exposed, kind and approachable demeanor	Upright brows, bulging eyes, wide mouth, stern and awe-inspiring	Furrowed brows, glaring eyes, ferocious and angry, terrifying appearance	Willow-leaf brows, smiling eyes, teeth slightly visible, amiable and kind demeanor	Arched brows, small eyes, upturned mouth, closed lips, ambiguous half-smile
Color Scheme	Red face, black crown, golden wings	Yellow face, black-and-red crown	Black crown, black face, black beard, crescent mark	Blue face, golden crown, red brows	Yellow face, red lips, blue crown	White face, red lips, black hat
Symbolic Meaning	Loyalty, righteousness, benevolence, courage; protector of the clan	Good harvests, favorable weather, peace and prosperity for the nation	Punishing the corrupt, upholding justice, stern impartiality	Expelling demons, slaying monsters, defender of justice	Kindness, honesty, Sincerity	Cunning, deceitful, Selfish

The movements in Nuo dances are highly formulaic, and body language becomes a means of expressing divine power and social norms. For instance, the striking movements symbolizing exorcism and the whirling steps of blessing are both symbolic acts whose meanings transcend the physical gestures themselves. Through repetitive actions, villagers reinforce the

collective experience of belief, while on the social level, these performances generate psychological and emotional resonance (Chen, Khochprasert & Suvimolstien, 2024).

Music, chanting, and recitations in Chizhou Nuo accompany mask and dance performances. Their strong and repetitive rhythms intensify the solemnity of the ritual, while chants narrate the history of deities and the merits of ancestors. As sonic symbols, music and language not only transmit information but also construct a sacred atmosphere, whose meanings depend on villagers' interpretations within a specific context (Hall, Nixon & Evans, 2025).

Props and spatial arrangements equally possess symbolic significance. Items such as the red bird, bows and arrows, five-colored umbrellas, and ancient coins are associated with exorcism, blessings, and sacrificial purposes, symbolizing the balance of yin and yang or mythological narratives. Through the use of these material symbols and spatial configurations, villagers affirm both sacredness and social order (He & Wang, 2025). Nuo, therefore, is not merely a performance but a ritual process that reconstructs social meaning through materiality and space.

Taken together, Nuo is a multidimensional process of symbolic interaction: masks, dances, music, chants, and props constitute the representamen, pointing toward deities and ancestors, while villagers as interpreters endow them with meaning. This interaction reproduces religious belief and reinforces emotional and communal identity among members. The ritual not only sustains sacred order but also fosters social integration and psychological adjustment (Bell, 2009).

In summary, the rituals and performance forms of Chizhou Nuo embody a complex symbolic system: masks, dances, music, chants, and props signify deities, ancestors, and social order, while villagers, as interpreters, bestow them with meaning. This symbolic interaction reveals the core mechanism for the continuation and development of Nuo culture, in which cultural representation and communal belief are continuously constructed and reproduced within ritual practices.

2. Belief Mentality and Community Participation

Chizhou Nuo is not only a religious ritual and performing art but also an important expression of villagers' belief mentality and social participation. From a semiotic perspective, Nuo culture, through its symbolic representations, weaves together supernatural power, social order, and individual emotions, enabling villagers to continuously reaffirm their faith and identity during participation. This interactive mechanism allows Nuo culture to extend beyond the stage and altar, penetrating deeply into villagers' daily psychology and social relations. The discussion unfolds from five dimensions.

The belief mentality of villagers is not merely a matter of religious faith but is constructed through the symbolic system of Nuo culture. Masks, dances, and props serve as the representamen, while their object is the power of deities and ancestors; this relationship only takes shape through villagers' interpretations. In the ritual, villagers interpret illness, misfortune, and the threat of malevolent spirits as the absence of divine order, and through ritual performance, such order is symbolically restored (Zhao, 2024). Hence, belief mentality is not only about reverence for supernatural forces but also a psychological projection of social and natural order.

By participating in Nuo rituals, villagers not only approach deities in a religious sense but also achieve recognition and consolation on an emotional level. The ritual provides a channel for emotional release, allowing collective emotions to be expressed in a concentrated way. In Chizhou Nuo, villagers, through chanting, dancing, or observing the performance, share common emotional experiences, thereby strengthening their sense of collective belonging. This affective recognition is not confined to the individual level but is elevated to a community-wide social bond through ritual performance.



Figure 1 Chizhou Nuo: “Umbrella and Coin Dance” (Source: Photographed by researcher, 2025)

The umbrella is an essential ritual prop in Nuo performances, symbolizing the celestial dome. For this reason, it is also referred to as the “divine umbrella” or “cosmic umbrella.” The Umbrella and Coin Dance is typically performed during transitional moments of the ritual, such as the welcoming of deities, the installation of sacred images, or the opening of a community altar.

The coins, traditionally crafted from wood or bamboo, symbolize land and wealth. During the performance, the dancer repeatedly aligns the tip of the umbrella with the central hole of the coin, symbolizing the union of heaven and earth. This act reflects a concrete expression of the villagers' primal fertility worship, embedding cosmological and social meanings within the ritual.

Nuo culture not only shapes villagers' belief mentality but also reinforces social order within the community. The organization of rituals often requires intra-village cooperation, such as the selection of officiants and the division of labor in preparing props and venues. This collective labor process itself represents the reproduction of social order (Douglas, 2003). At the same time, the moral and ethical values conveyed by the Nuo rituals are continuously instilled in villagers through performance, becoming part of everyday community life. Thus, community participation is not merely an external manifestation of rituals but also a process of reproducing belief systems and social norms.

Semiotics emphasizes the role of the interpreter. In Chizhou Nuo, villagers, as interpreters of symbols, are not passive recipients of cultural meanings but active agents who endow them with new connotations. Younger generations may regard Nuo more as a cultural heritage and an emblem of identity, while older generations may emphasize its religious and exorcistic functions. Such diverse interpretations not only demonstrate the agency of villagers but also indicate that the symbolic meanings of Nuo are not fixed but are continuously reconstructed across generations and within changing social contexts.

Overall, the symbolic system of Chizhou Nuo realizes the integrative function of society by shaping belief mentality and fostering community participation. The ritual not only provides psychological security and emotional resonance but also maintains village order and identity within the social structure (Durkheim, 2008). In other words, the value of Chizhou Nuo lies not merely in its role as a religious performance but in its ability to continuously reconstruct the cultural and social foundations of the community through belief and symbolic interaction. This process is precisely the key mechanism that enables intangible cultural heritage to persist in contemporary society.

In conclusion, Chizhou Nuo, through semiotic mechanisms, closely links belief mentality, ritual participation, and community integration. The representamen constituted by masks and dances, the religious object of deities and ancestors, and villagers' interpretive acts together construct a dynamic system of belief. This system not only responds to people's dependence on supernatural forces at the religious level but also sustains community cohesion and identity at the

social level. Therefore, Chizhou Nuo is not merely a folk drama or religious ritual but a profound cultural representation, whose core value lies in the organic integration of faith and social life.

3. Symbolic System and Cultural Representation

The uniqueness of Chizhou Nuo culture lies not only in its ritual and performative forms but also in its symbolic system, which constructs and expresses social order, religious faith, and cultural identity. Cultural symbols generate meaning through the dynamic process of “object–representamen–interpreter.” In Chizhou Nuo, masks, costumes, dance movements, musical rhythms, and spatial arrangements constitute a multilayered symbolic network that externalizes villagers’ psychology and social structures, while also sustaining the significance of intangible heritage in contemporary society.

From a semiotic perspective, the mask is a typical representamen, whose object may be deities, ancestors, or natural forces. However, this relationship is not inherently given but is continuously maintained through villagers’ beliefs and interpretive practices. For example, the authoritative image of the “Guan Gong” mask not only symbolizes divine power for exorcism but, through the performer’s actions and the audience’s reception, becomes a representation of disaster–avoidance and protection in villagers’ psychology. The drumbeats and music of Nuo dances likewise carry symbolic meaning: the strong rhythms correspond to collective appeals for harvest or epidemic prevention, and through bodily and sensory experience, villagers acquire psychological comfort and religious support (Lai, 2025). Thus, the symbolic system of Chizhou Nuo is both symbolic and functional, maintaining social and religious order through cultural representation.

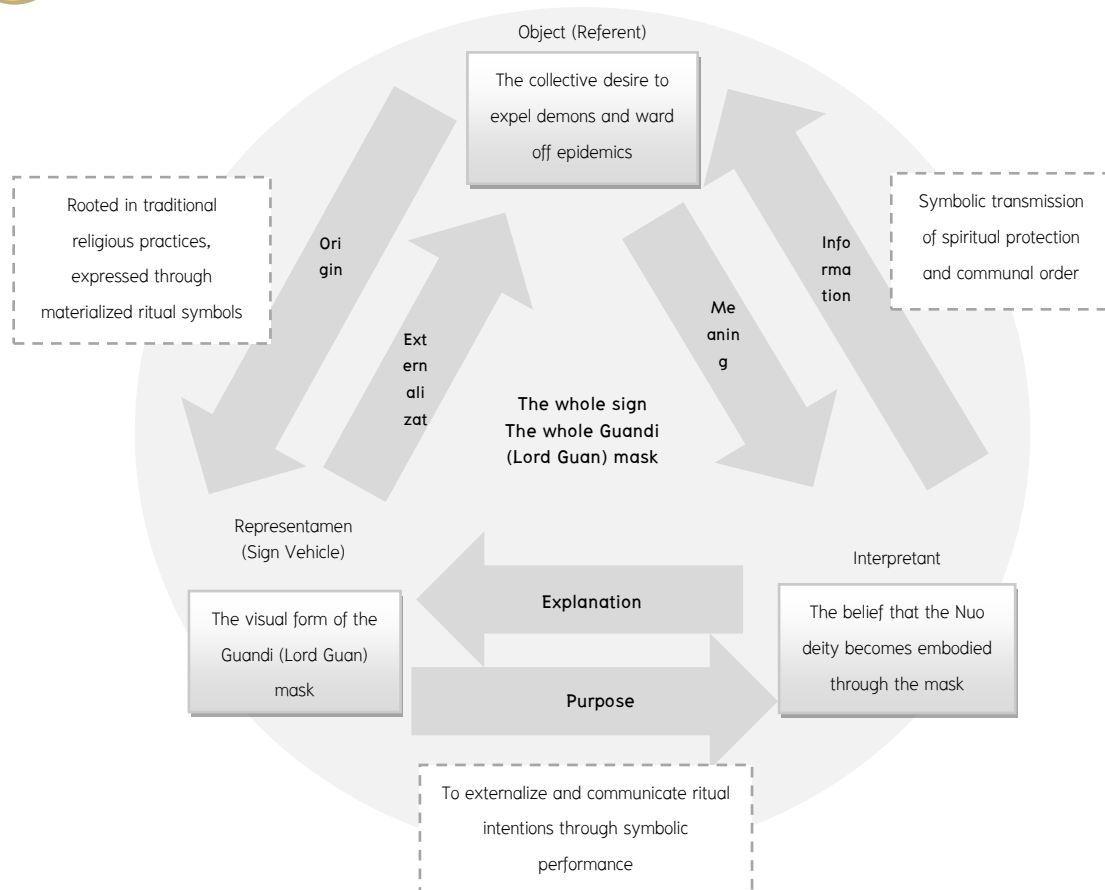


Figure 2 Diagram of the Semiotic Interpretation of the Guandi Mask in Chizhou Nuo, based on the Tripartite Model of Semiotics (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Cultural representation emphasizes that symbols are a symbolic re-enactment of group identity and social structure. In Chizhou Nuo, the combination of masks, costumes, and dance movements not only embodies communication between humans and deities but also reflects village hierarchy and division of roles. Variations in masks and costumes of different roles highlight divine order and authority, a symbolic order internalized by villagers into a social logic of “obedience and protection.” With social development, certain symbols have gradually assumed a “cultural identity” function. For instance, masks as emblems of local culture are used in tourism souvenirs, creative products, and festive activities, demonstrating the dynamism of the symbolic system and its adaptability to social contexts (Lin & Chen, 2025).

The continuous efficacy of the symbolic system relies on villagers as “interpreters.” Villagers regard performers not merely as actors but as incarnations of deities, which affirms the relationship between representamen and object at both psychological and emotional levels. Moreover, different villages may assign different deities and stories to the same mask, indicating

that symbolic meaning depends on the construction of specific cultural contexts (Deng & Hassan, 2024).

From a cross-cultural perspective, the symbolic system of Chizhou Nuo shares commonalities with Japanese Noh or Southeast Asian primordial mask performances, where masks and movements jointly express dependence on deities. Yet, Chizhou Nuo places greater emphasis on manifesting deities and their exorcistic functions (Brandon, 1997). This distinctiveness underscores the combination of religiosity and sociality in Chizhou Nuo.

In contemporary contexts, the development of intangible cultural heritage protection and cultural industries has given the symbolic system new representations. Masks, music, and dance have been re-contextualized as resources for academic research, cultural tourism, and creative design (Wu, 2024). The integration of traditional religious interpretations with modern cultural consumption logics allows symbols not only to carry cultural dissemination but also to reinforce villagers' identity recognition. The symbolic system of Chizhou Nuo has thus transformed from an intra-village religious practice into a regional cultural representation, extending its cultural vitality and providing new interpretive space for global cultural exchange.

Discussion

Chizhou Nuo is a multi-layered symbolic system. Masks, dances, music, and ritual spaces are symbolic forms for divine worship and social norms, with villagers—their interpreters—generating meaning through participation. This aligns with Clifford Geertz's "thick description," focusing on interpreting cultural meaning beyond behavior. In performance, masks aren't just decorative; the deities and supernatural powers they represent are reproduced via collective interpretation. This symbolic mechanism lets Nuo transcend pure art, acting as a key vehicle for sustaining social order and collective belief. Through codified movements and symbols, Chizhou Nuo conveys cultural meanings—notably its religious role in clans/communities—exerting profound social and psychological influence.

Nuo not only sustains religious rituals but reflects villagers' beliefs and social roles. In rituals, villagers affirm faith and release emotions through participation—aligning with "social drama" theory, where symbolic actions foster group integration and order (Schechner, 2020). Its distinct but linked functions: religious (supernatural protection via exorcism/blessings), emotional (anxiety relief through collective performance), and social (strengthening ancestral/communal ties for village identity). Fieldwork shows, for example, that in mask rituals, villagers' synchronized

chants and prostrations—called “talking to ancestors together” by a local elder—embody these functions. Villagers are not passive but active co-creators, shaping symbolic meaning via responsive acts, prayers, and ritual interactions.

Amid modern social transformation, Chizhou Nuo’s persistence shows both its intangible heritage (ICH) value and ongoing relevance in contemporary community life. Preserving it needs more than safeguarding performance forms—it requires understanding the underlying belief systems and social functions. As rural structures change (e.g., young labor outflow weakens traditional participation, yet festival performances rebuild symbolic vitality), Nuo’s role in sustaining community identity grows, providing villagers spiritual resources to cope with social transition and identity crises. Moreover, rooted in Chinese clan culture, Chizhou Nuo shares with East Asian ritual traditions (e.g., Japanese Noh, Korean masked dances) the mechanism of enacting belief and social functions via symbols—offering new perspectives for comparative studies of global mask cultures (e.g., analyzing symbolic logic differences between Nuo and Noh). This analysis draws on ethnographic observation and cross-cultural textual comparison to ensure academic rigor.

In sum, Chizhou Nuo is not just a historical legacy but a living social resource. Its symbolic-religious functions persist amid changes, aiding global ICH talks, while our “ritual symbolic interaction model” enriches cross-cultural ritual studies.

New Knowledge from Research

This study makes contributions on three levels: academic, socio-cultural, and intangible cultural heritage preservation. By employing semiotic analysis, it reveals the complex symbolic structure of Chizhou Nuo, clarifies the social functions of villagers’ beliefs within rituals, and provides theoretical support for the protection and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. The specific contributions are summarized as follows:

Table 3 Research Contributions

Level	Research Contribution	Manifestation
Academic Level	Reveal the multi-layered symbolic system of Chizhou Nuo	Apply semiotic analysis to explore the relationships among masks, dances, music, space, and villagers' participation, and explain the dynamic mechanism of "signifier–signified–interpreter."
	Enrich studies on folk rituals and cultural representation	Integrate Nuo rituals, performances, visual symbols, and social functions to propose a symbolic–analytical pathway for cultural representation.
Socio–Cultural Level	Demonstrate how villagers' beliefs transform into social norms and psychological comfort	Analyze how villagers' participation, observation, and interaction within rituals contribute to social order, collective identity, and emotional regulation.
	Deepen the understanding of rural socio–cultural psychology	Through ritual observation and symbolic interpretation, reveal the psychological mechanisms of villagers' worship of deities, adherence to social norms, and collective identity.
Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Level	Provide theoretical support for the contemporary value of Chizhou Nuo	Elaborate the cultural significance of symbolic systems and rituals to inform ICH protection, transmission strategies, and cultural communication.
	Guide research on cultural creativity and regional identity	Propose feasible approaches to integrate Nuo cultural symbols into tourism, cultural and creative industries, and community cultural construction.

Note: Table presents the academic, socio–cultural, and intangible cultural heritage contributions of the study on Chizhou Nuo culture.

Conclusion

Taking Chizhou Nuo culture as its research object, this study integrates semiotics, cultural representation theory, and social function analysis to systematically examine its rituals, performance forms, visual symbolic system, and villagers' belief mentality. The findings suggest that Chizhou Nuo is not merely a form of mask art, but a multi-layered symbolic system jointly constructed by masks, dances, music, spatial arrangements, and participants. As the "signifier," the mask, when interpreted by villagers' participation, establishes a connection with the divine imagery—the "signified"—thereby sustaining social order and cultural identity.

The ritual and performance not only carry religious beliefs but also fulfill functions of emotional regulation and social integration. Villagers, in the process of participation, act both as receivers of belief and as co-creators of cultural representation, which endows Nuo culture with

dynamism and sustainability. At the same time, Chizhou Nuo demonstrates cross-cultural value in contemporary society: on the one hand, it is deeply rooted in Chinese lineage and community culture; on the other hand, its semiotic mechanisms are comparable with mask rituals in East and Southeast Asia, providing a new perspective for global mask culture studies. Overall, Chizhou Nuo, through its symbolic system and ritual practice, closely intertwines religion, society, and cultural identity, embodying the vitality and adaptability of folk culture in modern contexts.

Suggestions

Despite providing a systematic analysis of Chizhou Nuo culture, this study has certain limitations. First, the research scope is mainly confined to the Chizhou region, lacking cross-regional comparisons. Second, the methodology relies primarily on literature review and limited field observation, without large-scale empirical surveys. Future research can be extended in the following directions:

Expanding the scope of investigation: Conduct comparative studies of Nuo cultures in different regions to enrich understanding of their symbolic systems and cultural representations.

Integrating digital anthropology approaches: Examine the transmission, re-creation, and cultural-creative transformation of Nuo culture in new media environments.

Exploring the impact of social transformation: Investigate how commercialization and tourism influence the essence of Nuo culture and community identity.

Such future research could not only deepen theoretical knowledge of Chizhou Nuo culture but also contribute to the practice of intangible cultural heritage protection, rural cultural construction, and the development of cultural and creative industries, thereby providing pathways for the sustainable development of traditional culture in contemporary society.

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