

# The Stage Reconstruction and Innovation of the Artistic Form of Hainan Li Ethnic Women's Dance Through the Dance Work "Echoes of Life"

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**Abstract:** The Hainan Li ethnic group's dancing of the mother dance is a typical representative of the ancient sacrificial culture of the Li ethnic group, with rich ethnic memory and cultural connotations. The dance work 'Echoes of Life' is based on the intangible cultural heritage of the Li ethnic group in Hainan, known as the 'Dancing Mother Dance'. Through the reconstruction of traditional sacrificial scenes using modern dance vocabulary, it forms three major artistic features: the interweaving of sacrificial culture and life philosophy, the intertextuality of prop symbols and body language, and the integration of traditional procedures and modern aesthetics. It not only preserves the original cultural genes of the mother dance, but also endows dance works with the distinctive aesthetic value of the times, providing innovative references for the modern inheritance and expression of intangible cultural heritage dance.

**Keywords:** "Echoes of Life"; Li ethnic group; Dance Mother's Dance; Prop

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## 1. Overview of the Li ethnic group dancing mother's dance in Hainan

### 1.1. The origin of the mother's dance

The origin of the mother dance can be traced back to the primitive sacrificial system of the Li branch of the Li ethnic group in Hainan. Its historical context can be traced back to the late Neolithic period, when the Li ancestors practiced the belief in "all things have spirits". In the early days, as the core carrier of matrilineal shaman culture, female witches danced solo in exorcism and healing ceremonies, simulating the posture of gods and striking pottery bowls to achieve a "dialogue between humans and gods". According to the inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of Baoting Jiamao Village, the dance fully preserves the original footwork of "three steps forward and three steps backward", and forms a unique quarter beat rhythm with the swinging of the hips. Its movement system implies a metaphor for the natural cycle - forward symbolizes obtaining resources, and backward represents avoiding disasters. After 1951, with the changes in social structure, the dance of Niang transformed from being "god-based" to "human-based". In areas such as Qunying Township in Lingshui County, single-per-

son witchcraft rituals were expanded into collective self-entertainment activities, incorporating production scene simulations such as plowing and fishing, forming a composite performance form of “top bowl tapping+circular formation”, achieving a modern transformation from sacrificial symbols to cultural symbols.

### **1.2. The function of the mother’s dance**

Dance mother’s dance carries multidimensional functional values in the Li ethnic society, forming a composite functional system of “sacrifice, social entertainment protection”. In the religious dimension, as a ritual tool for “dispelling diseases and epidemics”, it constructs a symbolic channel for communication between natural gods and ancestors through the mother’s bowl tapping, simulating divine movements, and the three-stage program of inviting, welcoming, and worshipping gods. In the “Crossing the Volcano” ceremony still preserved in Baoting Jiamao Village, the sound of gongs and wooden drums forms a sound wave field, which, combined with the spatial displacement generated by the dancer’s “smooth turning” step, creates a dual effect of physical and psychological exorcism. In the social dimension, this dance promotes emotional connections among clan members through collective dancing and formation changes (such as the “one” formation to a circular formation). Its “three-step swinging hips” movement has been distilled into the iconic vocabulary of Li ethnic dance, strengthening ethnic identity in festivals such as “March 3rd”. In terms of intangible cultural heritage protection, after the recognition of the provincial list in 2024, Baoting and Lingshui will achieve functional iteration from traditional rituals to modern exhibitions through the cultivation of inheritors and the construction of campus inheritance bases. This functional evolution not only preserves the core cultural genes but also adapts to the needs of the times, forming a virtuous cycle of dynamic inheritance.

### **1.3. The artistic characteristics of the dancing mother’s dance**

Firstly, the dancing mother’s dance is an interweaving of sacrificial culture and philosophy of life. The Li ethnic group’s mother dance is an intangible culture in the Baoting area, Hainan. The core artistic feature of heritage is the combination of primitive sacrificial culture and philosophy of life. This dance originated from the ancient ethnic dance of Niang, which is an inheritance of sacrificial culture. It was originally a shamanic dance ceremony of the Qili branch to ward off evil and pray for blessings. By tapping with a bowl, the mother imitates the posture of gods and forms a dialogue with heaven and earth<sup>[1]</sup>. In the dance work ‘Echoes of Life’, this cultural gene is transformed into a poetic expression of the cycle of life. Dancers use withered leaves to symbolize the withering of life, and sprouting rice seedlings to symbolize the birth of new life. Through undulating movements, they simulate the farming scene of sowing and harvesting in labor. Among them, shaking hands to pray for blessings and twisting shoulders and hips are the main forms of using dance movements to reproduce agricultural scenes. In terms of dance steps, the entire dance piece utilizes the primitive steps of advancing three steps and retreating three steps, presenting the philosophical process of life withering and rebirth through changes in steps. For example, at the beginning of the dance, the dancer crawls forward in a low posture, holding a withered leaf as a symbol of the withering of life. As the rhythm of the music accelerates, withered leaves are thrown into the air and replaced by green rice seedlings. The process of dancers using rice seedlings metaphorically implies that life will last forever in the cycle of reincarnation<sup>[2]</sup>. This transformation from sacrificial rituals to the philosophy of life. On the one hand, it retains the original cultural genes of the mother dance. On the other hand, it also gives dance a moving modern aesthetic value, and moving dance movements are also a manifestation of vitality.

The fusion of traditional and modern aesthetics in the dance form of “Echoes of Life” preserves the traditional form of dancing, the mother dance. On this basis, a precise dialogue dance between traditional and modern

aesthetics has been achieved through modern creative techniques, strictly following the eight performance procedures of the dancing mother dance. Core movements such as “shaking hands to pray for blessings”, “jumping and kicking steps”, and “three step swinging hips” have been set up, and traditional spatial layouts such as “circular formation” and “trapezoidal formation” have been used to restore the original style of the Li ethnic collective team. This traditional and modern fusion method makes dancing mother dance not only maintain cultural authenticity, but also possess aesthetic appeal that transcends the times <sup>[3]</sup>.

## **2. The stage reconstruction of the dancing mother’s dance in the dance work “Echoes of Life”**

### **2.1. Reconstruction from sacrifice to art**

The essence of the ritual of dancing mother dance to artistic reconstruction is the process of transforming traditional rituals into modern artistic language. Taking the Dance Academy of Central University for Nationalities’ “Echoes of Life and Death” as an example, this work transforms the Li ethnic group’s primitive belief in “all things have spirits” into a stage language with aesthetic value through the core ritual symbol of “bowl tapping”. Director Su Yafei retained the original footwork of “three steps forward and three steps back” in the creation of the mother dance, but elevated it from a functional action of a sacrificial ceremony to a carrier of artistic expression. In terms of action design, the composite form of “top bowl tapping+circular formation” not only retains the ceremonial sense of “human god dialogue”, but also enhances artistic expression through the visual impact of group dance. The specific reconstruction strategy is reflected in three dimensions: firstly, the purification of action symbols. The movements such as “turning steps” and “kicking steps” in traditional dance have been distilled into iconic vocabulary, forming rhythmic dance vocabulary through repetition, transformation, and combination. For example, in “Echoes of Life”, the “three-step swinging hips” action is decomposed into seven basic action units, forming a narrative sequence from sacrifice to celebration through different combinations. Next is the transformation of ritual space. The traditional mother dance takes place in the village square, while the stage reconstruction constructs a multidimensional space through lighting, scenery, and sound effects. The work reconstructs the image of exorcising evil and praying for blessings through the ritual of “crossing a volcano” in the mother dance into a scene where dancers spiral through a wall of light, shadow, and fire. Through the intertextuality of physical tension and light and shadow changes, it metaphorically represents the eternal will of the ethnic group to live in adversity, achieving an artistic leap from regional worship to the common spiritual aspirations of humanity. This kind of reconstruction is not a simple form transformation, but a creative transformation of “deconstruction recombination” to achieve the artistic regeneration of traditional rituals. The linear narrative of traditional mother dance is deconstructed into a triple temporal and spatial structure of “sacrifice celebration philosophy”. “Echoes of Life” transforms the traditional “top bowl tapping” into a resonant interaction between dancers and the ground, elevating the “communication between humans and gods” in the ritual to a contemporary interpretation of the cycle of life.

### **2.2. Reconstruction of life into symbols**

The core of the transformation from the life of a dancing mother to symbol reconstruction is to transform the production and life scenes of the Li people into stage symbols with symbolic significance. This kind of reconstruction is reflected in three levels: action symbols, spatial symbols, and prop symbols. At the level of action symbols, production movements such as “plowing steps” and “fishing steps” in traditional Chinese dance have been distil-

led into iconic vocabulary. In “Echoes of Life”, the “plowing step” is decomposed into three action units: “bow step forward leaning, arm movement, and center of gravity transfer”, forming a dance vocabulary that expresses agricultural scenes through repeated combinations. These actions not only retain the morphological features of the original actions, but also give them new symbolic meanings through artistic processing. At the level of spatial symbols, the traditional “circular formation” of the mother dance has been transformed into a symbolic stage space. In the Baoting Jiamao Village performance, a spatial structure of “circle square circle” is formed through the dynamic changes of the dancer queue, symbolizing the cosmology of “round sky and round earth”. At the same time, through the technique of combining reality and virtuality in the stage setting, the living scenes of Li ethnic villages, such as “boat-shaped houses” and “barns,” are transformed into symbolic stage spaces. At the level of prop symbols, traditional folk dance items such as “rooster bowls” and “wooden chopsticks” have been given new symbolic meanings. For example, in the action of “hitting the top bowl”, the bowl is not only a musical instrument, but also an important symbol connecting heaven and earth. The dance posture of dancers with bowls on their heads symbolizes the philosophical idea of “unity of heaven and man”. The key to this reconstruction lies in the transformation logic of “life prototype art symbol”. Taking “straw” as an example, in traditional dance, straw is used for sacrificial ceremonies, while in stage reconstruction, it is transformed into a symbol of “harvest” through the action of “straw weaving”. At the same time, through the “straw installation art”, straw is transformed into stage props with visual impact. This transformation not only retains the basic characteristics of the life prototype but also endows it with new symbolic meanings through artistic processing.

### **2.3. Reconstruction from traditional to modern**

The core of the traditional to modern reconstruction of dancing is to achieve the contemporary transformation of traditional dance through the integration of modern technology and artistic language. This reconstruction is reflected in three dimensions: firstly, the modernization of action language. The traditional dance language of the mother dance achieves modern transformation through “deconstruction recombination”. In “Echoes of Life”, the “smooth turning step” is decomposed into three action units: “foot movement - center of gravity transfer - arm swing”, forming a modern dance vocabulary through different combinations, giving traditional movements new artistic vitality. The tapping of bowls is an important part of the ceremony in traditional dance, while in modern reconstruction, a mixture of electronic sound effects and bowl sounds is used to create a modern sound effect. Meanwhile, through the installation art of “bowl deformation”, the bowl is transformed into a stage prop with visual impact. This transformation not only retains the basic characteristics of traditional elements but also makes it a stage art with contemporary aesthetic value through the innovation of modern artistic language.

## **3. The innovative value of “Echoes of Life”**

### **3.1. The modern innovation of the mother’s dance**

The novel ‘Echoes of Life’ promotes the modern transformation of Li ethnic women’s dance through innovative artistic practices, achieving a deep reconstruction from ritual symbols to stage aesthetics. The directing team deconstructed and reorganized the core movements of the dancing girl dance: retaining the original gait of “three steps forward and three steps backward”, and forming a spatial image of “yin and yang mutually arising” through the dynamic arrangement of circular queues, transforming the traditional ritual of circular worship into a stage narrative with philosophical significance. The innovative use of the “bowl tapping” ritual in the work, through the sound field design of the gong matrix, triggers resonance of different pitches in the dancer’s movements,

transforming the auditory experience of “echo” into a visual space. This creative technique not only preserves the original belief core of “dialogue between humans and gods” in traditional Chinese dance, but also expands the modern aesthetic dimension of ethnic dance through cross-media expression.

### 3.2. The living inheritance of the dancing mother’s dance

The core concept of ‘Living Echoes’ is to construct a sustainable inheritance path for Li ethnic women’s dance from folk rituals to contemporary stages, with the value concentrated in three dimensions. Firstly, the work achieves contemporary activation of cultural genes through the translation of bodily memory. When the directing team went deep into the Li ethnic villages to collect raw materials for dancing the girl dance, they not only recorded the movement forms, but also paid attention to capturing the details of the dancer’s breathing rhythm, muscle exertion, and other bodily memories. For example, they transformed the unique technique of the old artist’s “wrist tremble driving bowl edge tremble” into a work on stage, which not only preserved the “originality” of traditional movements, but also endowed them with replicable inheritance standards through dance works, solving the problem of distortion in folk dance “oral and heart-to-heart transmission”. This not only maintained the cultural authenticity of dancing but also gained vitality that adapts to different historical contexts, truly realizing the transformation from “endangered skills” to “living culture”.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of this article, it can be concluded that in the dance work “Echoes of Life”, the arrangement of the dance work not only inherits the basic form and cultural connotation of Hainan Li ethnic dance, but also emphasizes innovation in the arrangement form and visual presentation effect. It is an important attempt to dynamically and flexibly present the traditional dance art form, and also a successful example of inheriting and disseminating dance culture and art. It can provide an effective reference for the creation of ethnic dance works.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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