

Rhythm in the Drum, Dance in the Legacy: A Study on the Preservation and Modern Transformation of Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: The Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance, a unique local sacrificial dance, is practiced in the Xiang River basin of Xiangtan, Hunan Province. Characterized by a vigorous and impassioned style and rhythmic, vibrant beats, it projects a distinct aura of awe-inspiring power. As a singular form of single-sided drum dance specific to the Xiangtan region, it remains a rarity within China. In 1986, the dance was documented in the *Anthology of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dances*, a key national publication compiled under the auspices of the former Ministry of Culture. It was later listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hunan Province. As a precious relic of folk art, the Oil-Drum Dance not only fills a gap in the narrative of Chinese dance history regarding this region but also provides an invaluable living specimen for the study of sacrificial dance culture in the Chu-Hunan tradition. Guided by the thematic framework of “The Rhythm and the Legacy”, this paper focuses on the safeguarding of the Oil-Drum Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage and its modern transformation. It systematically reviews the current state of its transmission, analyzes in depth the challenges it faces—particularly the rupture in intergenerational transmission—and explores pathways for its living preservation and strategies for its modernization. The aim is to facilitate the art form’s better adaptation to contemporary societal needs and to provide insights for the inheritance and innovation of similar forms of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Keywords: Oil-drum dance; Folk art; Intangible Cultural Heritage

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, the dynamic transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) holds profound significance for strengthening cultural identity and fostering cultural confidence. The Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance, a distinctive sacrificial dance from the Chu-Hunan region, embodies the belief systems and folk performance

traditions of its local ancestors, serving as a veritable “living fossil” of regional folk culture. However, under the pressures of modernization and cultural diversification, this heritage now faces multiple challenges, including a shrinking performance space, inadequate transmission mechanisms, and limited public awareness, posing a serious threat to its continued existence and development ^[1].

In response to these pressing concerns and grounded in the practical needs of ICH safeguarding, this paper takes the Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance as its case study. It systematically examines the current state of its transmission and core dilemmas. By drawing on practical insights from relevant domestic and international case studies, the paper explores feasible pathways for the dance to “preserve its core essence while pursuing innovation” within contemporary society. The aim is to provide both theoretical and practical support for the sustainable safeguarding of this specific heritage and similar ICH projects ^[2].

Regarding methodological approach, this research is conducted primarily through three key methods: First, documentary analysis. This involves systematically collecting and reviewing local chronicles, historical folk records, and existing scholarly works to clarify the historical origins, ritual context, and cultural connotations of the Oil-Drum Dance. Second, field investigation. This entails in-depth participant observation at performance sites and semi-structured interviews with representative inheritors, practitioners, and community members to gather firsthand, dynamic data.

This research not only contributes a significant local case to the scholarly understanding of the Chu-Hunan sacrificial dance system, thereby broadening the academic perspective on regional dance culture, but also strives to distill transferable and actionable strategies for dynamic transmission from a practical standpoint. Consequently, it seeks to offer regional experience with both theoretical value and practical relevance for the protection and contemporary transformation of comparable forms of ICH.

2. The historical origins and cultural connotation of Xiangtan oil-drum dance

2.1. Historical origins

The Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance possesses deep historical roots, with its origins traceable to sacrificial rites of ancient societies. During historical periods marked by relatively low levels of productivity, people commonly held a sense of reverence toward natural phenomena. They often employed physical rituals to communicate with deities, praying for favorable weather and the well-being of their communities. At this stage, the Oil-Drum Dance was not merely an artistic performance but a ritual act laden with sacrificial and religious functions, embodying the primal religious concept of interaction between humans and the divine.

With the evolution of social structures and cultural ecology, the function of the Oil-Drum Dance gradually transitioned from the religious to the secular. It moved from altars into the sphere of folk culture, extending from ritual contexts to spaces of communal life such as festive celebrations, temple fairs, and market gatherings. Its performance content and form continuously incorporated local elements of entertainment, thus developing into a folk dance form widely enjoyed by the people. This process reflects not only an adaptation in the artistic form of the dance itself but also shifts in the cultural needs and collective identity of local society.

2.2. Cultural significance

Throughout its long historical evolution, the Oil-Drum Dance has not remained confined to a singular sacrificial function. Through sustained interaction with local society, it has gradually accumulated into a cultural complex

rich in layers and pluralistic in meaning. It is not merely a display of physical movement but a symbolic cultural system integrating sacred beliefs, folk practices, and regional identity. Interpreting its cultural significance requires moving beyond the surface level of artistic form to delve into the socio-historical context that sustains it. A systematic analysis from three interconnected dimensions—religious sacrifice, folk life, and regional culture—is necessary to reveal how this ancient dance has become a “living” gene for cultural transmission in the central Hunan region.

2.2.1. Significance in religious sacrifice

The Oil-Drum Dance retains distinct ritualistic and sacred qualities. Its choreography, rhythmic variations, and performance procedures all embody reverence and supplication towards nature deities and ancestors. Through bodily symbols and rhythmic patterns, the dance constructs a ritual field for communication between humans and the divine, reflecting the awe and hopes that early residents of Xiangtan placed in supernatural forces. This practice of belief has gradually been internalized as local cultural memory throughout historical development, becoming an embodied continuation of the Chu-Hunan sacrificial system within folk dance.

2.2.2. Significance in folk life

Through prolonged local practice, the Oil-Drum Dance has become deeply embedded in the rhythms of Xiangtan folk life, serving as an important medium for folk rituals and social interaction. The dance is closely linked to the cyclical timing of folk customs such as annual festivals and life-cycle rites: performances during the Spring Festival use boisterous rhythms to enhance the festive atmosphere, while performances within wedding ceremonies convey collective blessings for familial prosperity and marital happiness. Such performances not only strengthen community cohesion but also, through repetitive bodily practice, facilitate the intergenerational transmission of folk norms and cultural memory.

2.2.3. Significance in regional culture

The style, performance conventions, and implements of the Oil-Drum Dance bear distinct local characteristics of Xiangtan. The dance organically integrates local vocal styles, movement vocabulary, costume patterns, and prop craftsmanship, presenting a unity of diverse artistic forms within bodily expression. This synthetic form not only condenses the aesthetic inclinations and life wisdom of the Xiangtan people but also serves as a visual and kinetic representation of local cultural identity, vividly articulating the unique artistic character and humanistic spirit of the central Hunan region.

3. Analysis of the current state of transmission and existing problems of the Xiangtan oil-drum dance

As an intangible cultural heritage undergoing living transmission, the survival status of the Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance directly impacts the integrity of the Chu-Hunan sacrificial dance system and the diversity of the local cultural ecology. Within the dual contexts of globalization and modernization, the transmission of the Oil-Drum Dance faces both structural challenges common to many ICH projects and specific difficulties stemming from regional social transformations. Systematically reviewing its current state of transmission and analyzing its underlying problems constitutes the necessary cognitive foundation for constructing effective safeguarding strategies and achieving its creative transformation and innovative development.

3.1. Structural imbalance among bearer groups

The current population of practitioners and bearers of the Oil-Drum Dance shows a significant age gap and numerical decline. The average age of core bearers is high, with the physical capabilities of older bearers gradually weakening, affecting their ability to perform and teach. Meanwhile, younger generations exhibit generally low willingness to engage due to multiple factors, including employment pressures, shifting interests, and meager economic returns from transmission activities. This structural imbalance renders the chain of skill transmission fragile and poses a serious risk of intergenerational rupture ^[3].

3.2. Singular and rigid modes of transmission

The transmission of Oil-Drum Dance skills has long relied on traditional modes such as familial inheritance and master-apprentice oral instruction. While these methods have preserved the authenticity of the skills to some extent, they suffer from limitations, including a narrow scope of dissemination, unsystematic documentation, and vulnerability to individual circumstances. In recent years, attempts have been made to broaden transmission pathways through initiatives like establishing interest classes in schools and participating in folk cultural exhibitions. However, such measures are often temporary or event-based promotions and have not yet evolved into institutionalized, sustainable transmission mechanisms, resulting in limited audience reach and transmission effectiveness.

4. Strategic approaches for the preservation, transmission, and development of the Xiangtan oil-drum dance

4.1. Improving specialized regulations and policy frameworks

It is recommended that the Xiangtan Municipal People's Congress or the municipal government take the lead in formulating the Regulations on the Protection and Transmission of the Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance. These regulations should clearly define the objects of protection, the rights and obligations of bearers, safeguard measures, and legal liabilities. Strengthening the protection of intellectual property rights is also essential, involving the registration and rights confirmation of core skills, ritual procedures, musical scores, and related elements.

4.2. Establishing a diversified funding safeguard mechanism

A dedicated protection fund for the Oil-Drum Dance should be established at both municipal and district levels, with optimized performance-based management of fund utilization. Innovative financing models should be introduced to guide social capital—through measures such as tax incentives and project matching—to establish public welfare funds for ICH protection or to invest in cultural industries related to the heritage.

5. Conclusions

This study has reached the following core conclusions: First, as a precious ritual folk dance in the Hunan-Chu region, the historical evolution of Xiangtan Oil-Drum Dance exhibits a dynamic transformation from sacred ceremony to secular entertainment. Deeply rooted in local belief systems, it integrates three cultural dimensions—religious ritual, folk life, and regional identity. It is not only a form of physical performance art but also a living symbolic system that carries collective memory and cultural genes. Its distinctive rhythms, vigorous movements,

and meaningful formations collectively constitute a unique local aesthetic expression. Second, the current transmission of Oil-Drum Dance faces multiple challenges brought about by modernity. Structural dilemmas such as the discontinuity of inheritors, limited transmission methods, and shrinking performance contexts are intertwined with issues including the encroachment of modern cultural ecosystems, weak economic support, and a lack of systematic preservation mechanisms, thereby placing its living continuity in crisis. This reflects the widespread adaptation difficulties faced by some intangible cultural heritage items in China amid rapid social transformation. Future research may further track the implementation effectiveness of the proposed measures and explore in greater depth how digital technologies can more profoundly contribute to the sustainable vitality of intangible cultural heritage in areas such as documentation, preservation, dissemination, promotion, and experiential innovation.

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Disclosure statement

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