

# Analysis of the Style Characteristics of Fujian Nanyin and Minnan Folk Dance

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**Abstract:** Music and dance are interdependent and develop jointly within the realm of art. Nanyin, a distinctive musical form in Quanzhou, Fujian, and folk dance have been closely linked and developed together throughout history. At the beginning of this article, the concepts of Fujian Nanyin and folk dance are respectively explained, with an emphasis on exploring their individual and common stylistic features demonstrated during their closely related development processes.

**Keywords:** Nanyin; Fujian folk dance; Stylistic characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

The southern Fujian region has always played a crucial role on the historical stage. In particular, the uniquely styled folk dance forms are so dazzling that people are reluctant to leave, each of which is a wonderful manifestation of the rich cultural heritage, local customs, and practices of this area. Among them, “Quanzhou Chest Slapping Dance”, “Zhangzhou Big Drum and Parasol Dance”, “Colorful Ball Dance”, “Quanzhou Ball Kicking Dance”, “Huoding Gong and Huoding Po Dance” and so on are especially well-known both at home and abroad. As is known to all, the charm of dance unfolds in tandem with the musical rhythm. Excellent dance works surely need extraordinary musical accompaniment to be realized. Therefore, the folk dance art in the southern Fujian region has developed an interdependent and indispensable relationship with Nanyin.

## 2. Overview of Fujian Nanyin and Minnan region folk dance

### 2.1. Nanyin overview

Nanyin originated in Quanzhou, Fujian, and is a highly distinctive form of musical art that fully integrates the local customs and reflects the living conditions of the people. Chinese culture is extensive and profound, with a long history. As history has progressed, it has amassed a profound cultural heritage, and its richness is further enhanced by the unique

traditional cultural and artistic forms in various regions. Nanyin, as a characteristic music of southern Fujian, is hailed as a “living fossil” of traditional Chinese music culture. Nanyin also has other names such as “Xianguan”, “Nanqu”, “Nanguan”, and “Langjunyue.” With the passage of time, it was collectively referred to as “Nanyin.”

Historically, due to the well-developed transportation and prosperous economic activities in Quanzhou, merchants from all over the country gathered there. Thus, the Quanzhou dialect has evolved based on elements including the elegant language of the Six Dynasties, the ancient Yue language, the Wu language, and the Chu language. Nanyin, as a unique form of musical art in this area, gradually took shape on this basis. This gives Nanyin’s tunes an ancient, elegant, gentle, and beautiful charm, and it has been widely borrowed and absorbed by operas such as Liyuan Opera, Gaojia Opera, and Puppet Opera. Moreover, in the wedding and funeral customs of Quanzhou, Fujian, Nanyin has provided a lot of inspiration for the timbre display of musical instruments such as Longchui, Naoting, and Shiyin.

In addition, the musical score of Nanyin is a pipa score that uses the characters of the pentatonic scale as the backbone notes to accompany the vocal music. Among the four-piece instruments, the sanxian plays the backbone notes following the pipa, and the dongxiao (a vertical bamboo flute) and erxian play the melody along with the singer’s vocal ornamentation. This gives rise to the characteristic of “simple score, elaborate singing.” Nanyin skillfully ornaments the originally simple notes on the score, thus forming a unique vocal ornamentation in the singing, which makes Nanyin extremely melodious and full of endless charm.

## **2.2. Overview of folk dance in the southern Fujian region**

The forms of folk dance art in southern Fujian, Fujian, have gradually taken shape and developed based on the daily living habits and conditions of the local people, as well as the economic and social development. They are forms of cultural and recreational activities that adapt to social needs. During the development of folk dance, Nanyin plays a very important role. According to the “Annals of Quanzhou Prefecture Seasonal Events”, “On the night of the Lantern Festival, lanterns are hung, and glutinous rice balls are used to worship ancestors and gods. Some people offer wine and food in the ancestral hall, which is called the Spring Sacrifice. Also, during the Lantern Festival, there are temple fairs inside and outside the city to welcome the gods. In some rural areas, this activity is called paying respects to the gods in February.” This vividly demonstrates how the ingenious combination of Nanyin and folk dance brought the local customs and traditions of that area during the early Qing Dynasty to life. The performance of dance itself cannot be separated from the rhythm of music. Therefore, when exploring and studying the stylistic features of Fujian folk dance, it must be placed within the historical context of the formation and development of Nanyin. Only in this way can we embody the sense of wholeness in Chinese cultural aesthetics, which emphasizes “harmony in the overall structure.”

## **2.3. The internal relationship between Fujian Nanyin and southern Fujian folk dance**

In fact, the musical accompaniment used in the folk dances of southern Fujian, Fujian, has a very close connection with the vocal melodies of Nanyin. The “juxtaposition of multiple major thirds” demonstrated in the vocal melody of Nanyin, along with the “Zeng system” of the music from the Marquis Yi of Zeng’s chime bells in Suizhou, the “responding tones” in the Sui Dynasty, the “Gou” character in the Song Dynasty, and the pitch sequence of the Jian’ou tone cups in Fujian, have all been subtly absorbed, borrowed, and applied in the music of southern Fujian folk dances.

# **3. Analysis of the style characteristics of Fujian Nanyin and folk dance in southern Fujian**

## **3.1. Pursue the exuberant and unrestrained expression of joy**

In many folk dances in southern Fujian, Fujian, there is an exuberant, vibrant, and joyous atmosphere, which is reflected

in the rhythm of the music. In the selection of music for these folk dances, a large number of the overlapping beat vocal melodies in Nanyin are absorbed. The rhythm of this singing method is moderately fast. Within or between musical phrases, fourth-degree or fifth-degree notes are interspersed in step-by-step progressions. The overall musical sense is bright, smooth, and full of vitality. At the same time, between musical segments, fourth-degree and fifth-degree notes or fifth-degree and fourth-degree notes continuously rise, showing a bold and enthusiastic style.

The accompaniment music of the famous folk dance “Zhangzhou Big Drum and Parasol Dance” embodies these characteristics. The “Zhangzhou Big Drum and Parasol Dance” originated and became popular in Zhangzhou and Longxi areas of Fujian, China. During the performance, the dancers fully demonstrate the lively and cheerful atmosphere of the whole scene. The male dancers wear ancient warrior costumes and tie a big drum in front of their chests. When the music starts, they vigorously strike the drum with drumsticks in both hands according to the rhythm of the music. The female dancers are dressed as Dan role characters in ancient-style operas. They hold a long-handled parasol with tassels hanging from the edge in both hands. The dancers dance gracefully following the rhythm of the music and the beats of the drum. With the changes in the dance environment and emotions, the movement rhythms and amplitudes change accordingly, fully demonstrating the masculinity of men and the graceful beauty of women. The “Zhangzhou Big Drum and Parasol Dance” is very popular in southern Fujian. When people listen to the accompaniment music of the “Big Drum and Parasol Dance”, it is not difficult to find the phenomenon of the alternating upward movement of fourth-degree and fifth-degree notes in the melody. This is related to the large amplitude, fast and slow-paced fluttering of the parasol tassels following the drumbeats. When the music progresses to the upward movement of fourth-degree or fifth-degree notes, the dancers shout along, with high and excited emotions. The striking of the drumsticks and the dancing of the parasol tassels become more rapid, which also sets off the lively scene from another side and shows people’s satisfaction with their colorful lives at that time.

In addition, the music “Ba Gu Yue” of the “He Fan Dance” also has this characteristic. The “He Fan Dance”, also known as “Qian Gu Nong”, is a dance in the traditional operas of Liyuan Opera and Gaojia Opera in Quanzhou, “Wang Zhaojun”, in the scene of “Wang Zhaojun’s Departure to the Frontier.” It shows the foreign soldiers and generals welcoming Wang Zhaojun into the Yanmen Pass, singing and dancing. There are five dancers in the “He Fan Dance.” Wang Zhaojun holds a pipa in her hands, plays and sings the southern tunes “Leaving the Han Pass” and “Ba Gu Yue”, and makes various movements according to the changes in the lyrics, singing and dancing in a solemn and elegant manner. The other two male and two female dancers play the roles of foreign soldiers and generals. One male actor holds a money drum, one holds a money stick, one female actor holds a Sibao (a kind of percussion instrument), and one holds four small wine cups. They make various different movements with the changes of the fourth-degree and fifth-degree notes in the music, changing the formation around Wang Zhaojun to set off Wang Zhaojun’s emotions and dance. During the performance, the props in the hands of the four actors ring together, making the whole dance atmosphere cheerful, warm, and full of vitality.

### **3.2. Focus on the reproduction of humorous folk customs**

The accompanying music in Fujian folk dances usually mostly adopts the Yu mode and Shang mode. Nanyin, on the other hand, takes notes such as Yu, Shang, and Jue as the axis. The melody circles around the axis notes, showing an up-and-down surrounding characteristic, forming an undulating line of movement, which is cheerful, humorous, and amusing. This characteristic coincides with the rhythm of the “clown” dance in southern Fujian folk dances.

“The Quanzhou Ball Kicking Dance” is a famous piece in the “clown” dance. The dance performance takes the form of a group dance where a male ball player, a colorful old woman, and four to ten young girls follow the beat. The

dancers' actions such as competing for the ball, kicking the ball, and heading the ball vividly reproduce the sincere joy of people in group entertainment activities at that time. The Ball Kicking Dance is one of the main folk dances performed on occasions such as festivals, temple fairs, weddings, and funerals in Quanzhou, Jinjiang, Nan'an, Taiwan region, and other places. The characteristic of the melody of the music circling up and down around the axis note of Yu is integrated with the horizontal swaying and snake-like waist-moving rhythms of the clown character, the colorful old woman, in the Quanzhou Ball Kicking Dance, as well as the facial expressions of the colorful old woman. In "The Quanzhou Ball Kicking Dance", the horizontal swaying step rhythm lines of the colorful old woman from left to right, the undulating lines of her snake-like waist moving back and forth, the large amplitude swinging lines of her arms following the snake-like waist rhythm, together with the expression rhythms of the eyebrows, eyes, and mouth of the colorful old woman, complement the undulating line of movement of the accompanying music circling up and down around the Yu note. The humorous and witty performance of the dancer playing the colorful old woman is highly characteristic of the southern Fujian clown dance.

Another example is "Huoding Gong and Huoding Po Dance", which is another folk dance loved by the masses. Its accompanying music is the folk tune "Ten Flowers String." This tune is light-hearted, lively, and has a strong sense of rhythm, filled with a joyous atmosphere. The dance performance of "Huoding Gong and Huoding Po Dance" is completed by three people. Among them, Huoding Gong is dressed in a black lambskin fur coat, holding a long tangerine wood tobacco pipe in one hand and a banana leaf fan in the other. This is the costume of a "tattered clothes clown", and his funny dance movements make people burst into laughter. Huoding Po, on the other hand, is dressed in a red-trimmed front-buttoned long gown, holding a red handkerchief in one hand and a large round cattail fan in the other, which is the costume of a "housewife clown." The village girl is dressed in a turquoise-trimmed front-buttoned long coat and wide-legged trousers, carrying a load of firewood tied with ropes on a shoulder pole, which is the appearance of a "maid." Huoding Gong and Huoding Po carry a large iron cauldron placed on a wooden frame, with the firewood in the cauldron burning brightly red. The melody of "Ten Flowers String" is brisk and jumps from time to time, which complements the funny dance postures of Huoding Gong and Huoding Po, creating an interesting contrast. Following the beat of "Ten Flowers String", they either quickly dash through the crowd or slowly stroll. Their dance postures and expressions change at will, being unruly but not wild, tipsy but not muddled. They also fan the cauldron with the cattail fan from time to time, making all kinds of funny actions or using humorous words along the way, which makes the audience laugh heartily. The one carrying the firewood follows closely behind. This dance implies the hope for a prosperous and thriving life. Humorous and amusing dances like this are widely spread in various parts of southern Fujian.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Folk dances in southern Fujian, Fujian, are an artistic representation of the local social and economic development, local customs, and people's living conditions during the evolution of social history. Each local dance performance embodies a unique cultural connotation. Moreover, the development of dance is inseparable from music. As a characteristic art form in southern Fujian, Nanyin has played a crucial role in the development of folk dances and reflects profound artistic value. The reference and absorption of Nanyin in the development of folk dances in southern Fujian have not only ensured the enduring popularity of these dance forms but also led to their spread to the Taiwan region and even abroad. Therefore, the study of the stylistic features of Fujian folk dances and Nanyin has positive and far-reaching practical significance.



## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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