

## On the Culture Signs in Yancheng Nuo

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**Abstract:** Since Yangtze River basin is an important source of Chinese civilization, in modern times, Nuo as a folk sacrifice ceremony in Jiangsu is a division of Chinese Nuo culture. Nuo culture is the oldest and most vigorous intangible cultural heritage in China. It is derived from expulsion spell and witchcraft in ancient hunting times to deal with the wild animal, it is rooted in nature, totem worship, ancestral worship, god worship. Culture is a construction of signs, verbal signs are texts of sacred books (script of Tongzi drama), chanting of Nuo practitioners, written announcement by ink brush around the sacred shelter, and non-verbal signs including various artifacts, works of art are viewed as tangible signs. Auspicious thoughts, customs and folk beliefs belong to intangible signs. This study deals with semiotic analysis of Yancheng nuo in Jiangsu. It aims to find out the cultural connotations of its sign systems. The source of data was taken from fieldwork and interviews. Based on innovative classification of signs, it tries to explore the semiotic transformations between tangible signs and intangible signs.

**Keywords:** culture signs; Yancheng; nuo; ritual event; semiotic analysis.

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### Introduction

China has historically been an agricultural society, geographically speaking, the north of China is distinguished by the Yellow River, the south of China is defined by the Qinling Mountains and the Huai River, but the most famous river of the south is the Yangtzi. Wu in north China is named shamanism, and in south China is called Nuo(傩). Nuo is derived from *wu*(巫), which is an archaic Chinese religion and Chinese magic arts. In the origin and development of Chinese theatre, the *wu* exorcism ritual known as Nuo is at the very heart of the relationship between ritual and theatre in China (Zhao, 2019, p. 57). Nuo is a complex religious beliefs and practices prevailing mainly in ethnic minority areas in today's southwest China (Li, 2011, p. 1293). Actually, nuo practices also survive in Jiangsu, Anhui, and Jiangxi where Han nationalities inhabit. Liu (1989) claimed that Nuo as a primitive religious ritual has long been widely prevalent in the Central Plains region and the hilly areas in southern China, where farming is the dominant production model.

### Research Background

Nuo is a branch of Chinese wu culture, and its main function is to ward off evil spirits and enhance good luck (1989). Wu ritual is ancient and mysterious primitive ritual. Throughout its long period of development, lots of wu ritual variants with different regional traits constantly come into being. Since Yangtze River basin is an important source of Chinese civilization, in modern times, Nuo as a folk sacrifice ceremony in Jiangsu is a division of Chinese Nuo culture. Nuo culture is the oldest and most vigorous intangible cultural heritage in China. It is derived from expulsion spell and witchcraft in ancient hunting times to deal with the wild animal, it is rooted in nature, totem worship, ancestral worship, god worship. Culture is a construction of signs, verbal signs are texts of sacred books (script of Tongzi drama), chanting of Nuo practitioners, written announcement by ink brush around the sacred shelter, and non-verbal signs including various artifacts, works of art are viewed as tangible signs. Auspicious thoughts, customs and folk beliefs belong to intangible signs. These tangible and intangible signs together constitute the unique spiritual, material, emotional cultural system of rural community.

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### **Statement of Problems**

In case of Nuo in Jiangsu province, the academia mainly focuses on three aspects: the collation of Nuo events literature, the historical research on Yancheng Nuo, and the aesthetic research of Nuo rite. In terms of research perspectives, domestic scholars have explored the research value of Nuo in Jiangsu from the multidisciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, history, folklore, cultural heritage, and medicine and health science, but its value still has the potential to go further. At present, no scholar has integrated modern semiotics into the study of interpretation of Yancheng Nuo. The limitation of the previous findings is that some are descriptive analysis about the sacrificial phenomenon. However, potential philosophical thought, artistic value, cultural connotation and symbolism in Nuo need to be explored in depth.

### **Research Objectives**

1. to discuss the sign systems of Yancheng Nuo practice;
2. to explore the mechanism of semiotic transformations in the interpretation of ritual texts;
3. to analyze and interpret the profound cultural connotation of ritual symbolism in Yancheng Nuo;

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the multilevel sign systems of Yancheng Nuo culture based on local folk ritual practice?
2. What are the cultural connotations of ritual symbolism?
3. How do the semiotic transformations happen between tangible signs and intangible signs?
4. What is the relationship between the three Yancheng Nuo, folk religious beliefs and social function?

### **1.6 Research Scope**

This study main focus on the Nuo cultural phenomena in Yancheng rural communities, Jiangsu. Distinctive Nuo practice can also be found in other cities in Jiangsu, for example, Jinghu, Nantong, Lianyungang, Liuhe.

### **Literature Review**

Huai Opera, one of the more than 300 local types of Chinese opera, is the symbol of Yancheng's urban culture. Chinese opera is not directly transformed from a certain religious ritual, but is formed by a long period of fusion of various performing skills. The most influential religious ritual on the origin of Huai Opera is the Nuo sacrifice ceremony. Wang (1915) systematically explained the relationship between witchcraft and drama. Kang (1999) believes that "drama" can be understood through "nuo". Therefore, the study of local sacrificial ritual dramas can give a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the matrix of the local drama "Huai Opera".

The research on Jiangsu Nuo culture began in the 1980s. From the perspective of published papers, the research content mainly focused on three aspects: the documentation of Nuo activities, the historical research of Xianghuo opera, and the aesthetic research. In terms of research perspectives, domestic scholars have explored the research value of Jiangsu Nuo Opera from the multi-disciplinary perspectives of folklore culture, socio-religious science, and medicine and health science, but its value still has the potential to go further. At present, no scholar has integrated modern semiotics into the study of meaning interpretation of Yancheng Nuo Opera symbol system. Qu (2006) and Zhu (2018) proposed that young local dramas such as Huai opera and Yang opera Huangmei opera were influenced by Nuo and Nuo opera to varying degrees at the beginning of their formation. Qu Liuyi pointed out that Nantong-Lianyungang ritual drama is different from Nuo dramas all over the country, and has outstanding features in handicrafts and calligraphy. Zhu Hengfu summarized the eight performing skills in the Nuo Opera of Subei, such as "book", "painting" and "poke". However, the limitation of the research results is that there are many descriptive texts about the phenomenon, and there is a lack of explanatory texts about the symbolic meaning behind the phenomenon.

Overseas scholars intervened in research in the late 20th century. Foreign scholars maintain that there is a continuous relationship between sacrificial drama and appreciative drama. Japanese scholar Tanaka

Kazusei (2002) believes that the origin of Chinese drama is rural ritual activities. Rural opera performances are closely related to sacrificial activities.

### **Methodology**

The methods of fieldwork, interviews, questionnaires, observation, case study, qualitative analysis are applied in the research. In-person interview as a survey method was carried out for data collection. Sometimes, it was integrated with telephone survey, and a more convenient way-wechat survey.

In-person interviews were carried out to get to know the cultural connotation of different symbols, then got the authentic and firsthand information.

Observational method refers to go to the rural communities to watch nuo ritual, to perceive them with eyes, and with the technique support of smart phone and digital camera, the photographs or videos of the theatrical garments were taken and recorded for data collection and analysis. Narrative description was conducted for reference.

### **Findings**

#### **Yancheng Nuo as a folk culture marker**

Derived from a form of exorcism more than 2,000 years ago, Nuo is interpreted by domestic scholars as “living fossil” of primitive culture and is transformed into local folk culture. Edward B. Tylor, founding figure of anthropology, first used the term *culture* in his anthropological sense. Tylor wrote, “Culture[...] is that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society”(1871, p. 1) Tylor argued that culture includes customs that people acquire by growing up in a particular society. Human behavior is learned or inherited, it handed down from generation to generation for centuries. To be specific, culture can be the way people greet, dress, or worship their gods. Take the gods worship for example, the actions performed in a ritual are actions that learned from someone else, and thus the ritual ceremonies are passed down from one generation to the next. However, considering the learned behavioral patterns can change very rapidly in response to changing conditions, it makes sense that there are numerous variants of Nuo ritual all over the country. Over centuries folk religion Nuo has undergone significant changes in its cosmology, ritual symbolism and other characteristics.

In the long historical development and transmission of Nuo culture, Chinese Nuo features learning from and absorbing the essence of different cultures to meet the belief needs of people in different eras. Loyalty and filial piety of Confucianism, Buddhism’s concept of reciprocity, Taoist talisman, can all be found in some Nuo rites. On one hand, Nuo culture exerts great impact on the stylized performance of indigenous operas around China. On the other hand, Nuo rite have a profound influence on local folk culture and entertainment customs.

In Southwest China, Guizhou, Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei provinces name Nuo drama after location of altar, for instance, Guizhou nuotangxi(傩堂戏nuotang drama). Yancheng, Nantong, Lianyungang, Liuhe, and Jinhu regions in Jiangsu Province name nuo ritual after tongzi(童子local nuo practitioners), thus, the drama performed by tongzi is tongzixi (童子戏tongzi drama). Yancheng Nuo practice is composed of the following procedures: kaitan(开坛opening the altar), fabiao(发表issuing the document), jiaoshu(交熟offering cooked sacrifice), nianxiang(念香reporting the attendance to the gods), songshen (送神escorting away the gods), kaidao (开刀 Nuo skill show) Nuo drama, also known as tongzi drama, is interspersed among the whole ceremony. During nuo practice, tongzi recite stories from *Jianghuai Divine Book* in the context of Tang Dynasty, including the morality tales of Emperor Taizong Visits the Underworld (tangang youdifu唐王游地府), Liu Quan Presents the Melon (liuquan jingua刘全进瓜). This singing and speaking performance is recitation of repentance (nianchan 念忏) which is accompanied with traditional musical instruments, a drum, a gong and bamboo clappers.

#### **The Homogeneity and Heterogeneity in Nuo Practices**

Liu (1989) summed up the common trait of Nuo practice in different regions as: it preserves the basic function of drama, and combines poetry, myths, legends, songs and dances together. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Nuo lies in the masks which are of various shapes and colors, most of the masks are made of cottonwood or camphorwood, using carving tools. Masks becomes symbol in

religious ritual, and it signifies the supernatural power of absent gods. Since gods are invisible and formless, practitioners of the rite with mask incarnate the absent gods as they are present at this very moment. Meanwhile the mask turns the practitioner into gods receiving homage from the worshippers. On the other hand, the mysterious power of masks embedded in people's mind embodies the strong desire to control reality and rule their fate.

In the Yancheng, a northern city in Jiangsu, tongzi rarely wear masks, but wear caishentou (财神头 headgear with colored paper strips) with the same function as masks which are considered holy and efficacious. The costume is a necessity for the travel into the spirit world (Eliade, 1974, p. 147). The costume of the shaman is intended to get the attention of the spirits and the humans (Nelson, 2008, p. 69). The costume can be made up of animal skins and furs, bird feathers, colorful clothing and so on (Eliade, 1974, p. 259). Most often the costume includes elaborate headgear such as antlers or hats with animal symbols.

Handmade caishentou is made up of two parts (see Fig.1), upper part has elaborately folded horn-like origami decors on each side, and lower part has three horn-like decors and colorful paper strips hanging down with a series of auspicious motifs. During Nuo practice, chief tongzi is always bare-chested, wearing a distinctive colorful headgear and red and black skirt, shaking a holy knife high with iron rings as cold weapon to make loud noise with the purpose of enhancing mystery and warding off pestilence spirits. To some extent, caishentou is the representation of the gods, that is, the symbol and carrier of the invisible gods. It is a medium to communicate between man, ghost and gods. The act of putting on the headgear indicates the beginning of wu-oriented ceremony, and inform both audience and worshippers that they are entered another mystic space.

Tongzi is seen as the communicative medium between gods and men and the messenger between fairyland and mortal world. One of tongzi's multi-identities is exorcist, the practice of chopping a pair of chopsticks with clanking sacred knife door by door is similar to the one of four-golden eyed bearskin-clad fangxiangshi 方相氏, ancient Chinese ritual exorcist, who expelled evil spirits from human dwellings *with his lance and shield*. Evidence suggests it may have been performed as early as the Shang (17th to 11th-c. BCE), but the earliest concrete references come from the Eastern Zhou (8th to 3rd-c. BCE)



Fig.1- Caishentou headgear (left: upper part, right: lower part) part

### Sign system of Yancheng Nuo ritual

According to Swiss psychiatrist *Carl Gustav Jung*, *symbol* is “a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us” (Jung, 1964, p. 20). A symbol does not have to be a material object. Geometric shapes, colors, animals, body organs or body parts, gestures, events, spatial units, relationships, and activities are among the myriad objects that can become symbols. Turner considered symbols to be the “molecules” of rituals (Turner 2004, 26). Nuo

practice is composed of a myriad of tangible signs ritual implement signs, food offerings signs, art signs, gesture signs.

### **Transformation from Tangible Signs to Intangible Signs**

In what is Meaning? Victoria Welby described translation as “inter-translation,” a method of interpretation and understanding.

(Petrilli 2009, p. 517)

Jia (2019) affirmed that translation is a semiospheric phenomenon that within the same ethnic/exotic culture(s), involving the transformations between tangible signs, from the tangible signs into the intangible ones, and vice versa. Semiotic activities involving the translational activities between the signs in the physical and mental spaces (i. e. tangible and intangible signs) (Jia, 2019). In tangible class signs are divided into linguistic and non-linguistic signs.

[...] within the same language and culture, ethnic or exotic, the semiotic transformations from tangible signs into intangible ones can have the following three cases:

(1) The change of linguistic signs into the signs for mental activities in the human brain...; (2) The transformation of non-linguistic signs into the signs for mental activities in the brain...; (3) The transformation from a synthetic sign text composed of linguistic and non-linguistic signs into the signs for mental activities (Jia, 2019) .

the semiotic transformations from intangible signs into tangible ones vice versa.

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Ancient Chinese people created a large number of visual artistic symbols rich in content and diverse in form. Visual patterns as carriers of Chinese traditional auspicious thought range from animals, plants to pictographs. The cultural concepts of virtues, heaven-man unity, yin-yang five-element philosophy, strong desire for auspicious and better future which generated from antiquity are manifested in these physical forms.

Peirce’s sign theory is triadic, Peirce classifies sign into three aspects, sign or *representatum* or ground, object which is also referred to as *referent*, and *interpretant*. The first aspect is synonymous with Saussure’s concept termed as signifier which means physical signs (explicitly exist) (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993) but does not have to be material in nature (Chandler, 2002). Interpretant means any meanings conveyed by the representatum about the object which was previously unknown (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993), and abstract in nature (implicitly exist) and does not exist in human perception (Masinambaw, 2001). The interactional relationship between those three concepts is denoted by Peirce as semiosis (Chandler, 2002).

### **Nuo Decors and Traditional Auspicious Thoughts**

As a historical cultural heritage, folk paper-cut largely embedded in folk customs. The art of folk paper-cut may be traced back to a period as early as the ancient South and North Dynasties. It appeared at the same time of discovery of Chinese papermaking and is still prosperous across China. Since these pictorial signs are able to effectively and explicitly convey the information in rural communities whose population is largely illiterate, Chinese folk artists of the laborer community apply various artistic signs functioned as the art carrier of folk culture and ideologies to convey traditional auspicious thought, religious believes and provide comfort at heart.

According to Saussurean dyadic model of sign consisting of the signifier and the signified, the diversified auspicious designs of papercut in Nuo ritual space are signifier, the form of a sign, the abundant cultural connotation is the signified, the concept or object that’s represented. Popular papercut motifs in Yancheng Nuo includes sun, flowers, bats, fish and some characters. The most common characters are 喜(xi, happiness), 寿(shou, longevity), and the concocted character 囍, a combination of two xi(喜), meaning double happiness. The Chinese name for bats is fu蝠, which is a pun of 福fu. Image of bat including its various stylized forms frequently used in papercut art work to express an auspicious meaning of good fortune. Chinese artists have long used five bats to represent the five blessings. According to Hongfan (洪范Great Plan) chapter of Confucian Classic Shangshu尚书, five blessings are

shou (寿longevity), fu (福 wealth), kangning (康宁 health), meide (美德 good virtues), and shanzhong (善终 natural death) (Zhu, 1986, p. 941). Huan Tan 桓谭, a philosopher of the Han Dynasty, wrote in his book *Xin Lun* (新论 The New Statement) that the five blessings are shou and fu, but also gui (贵 nobility), anle (安乐peace and happiness), and zisun zhongduo (子孙众多many offspring) (Zhu, 2009, p. 45). Later the people began to refer to “Fu, Lu, Shou, Cai (财) and Xi” as the five blessings. Whatever the combination, they were used to represent the five great goals of life. Symmetric fish motifs convey wish for a surplus in the coming year, and symbolize prosperity, happiness and good fortune, as the Chinese character for fish (鱼yu) sounds the same as that for surplus (余yu).

Together with the pictorial puns, cut-outs become positive or auspicious symbols with the purpose of warding against danger and praying for happiness, longevity and good fortune.

Motifs are closely related to traditional auspicious thoughts in terms of Yin-yang and Five-element thoughts, Nature-man unity, they have become visual symbols by being infiltrated into nuo practice with different symbolic meanings. Therefore, nuo dotors not only embodies auspicious thoughts, but also interpret and express the desire for the auspicious life and prospective future since ancient times.

Man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe (Cassirer, 1944, p. 43-44) Like Cassirer, Susanne Langer argued that man is essentially a symbol-using animal. Symbolic thought is deeply rooted in the human nature - it is the keynote to questions of life and consciousness, all humanistic problems. “Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (Langer, 1953, p. 40)



Fig.2a- 喜寿福 motifs on tongzi headgear (from left to right)



Fig.2b- motifs in sacred shelter

### Calligraphic Auspicious Words on Bangwen

Bangwen(榜文calligraphic proclamation) in ancient China was the most common media to disseminate decrees. The earliest records of bangwen could date back to the spring and Autumn Period. The main function of this linguistic signs has long been to convey information to the public. In nuo ritual hanging Bangwen around three sides of scared shelter is one of the communicative acts, which sends the following three messages: First, inviting gods in three realms, including nature gods, ancestral spirits, and household gods. Second part, the specific date, address, host, attendants and main purpose of the nuo practice. Third, auspicious and lucky phrases. These phrases traditional Chinese characters on hanging bangwen from right to left reads (see Fig.3):

[...]beseech gods, spirits, and ancestors for男增百福endless fortune for men, 女納千祥endless auspiciousness for women,福如東海fortune as vast as the East Ocean, 寿比南山longevity as great as the South Mountain,春安夏泰peace in spring and summer, 秋吉冬祥good luck in autumn and winter, 风调雨顺clement weather, 國泰民安country in prosperity and people in peace,五谷丰登good harvest, 六畜兴旺abundant livestock,工作順利successful career, 財源廣進wealth, 家家清泰household peace, 戶戶均安household safety, 出入平安safe journey, 人口太平family members in grant peace, 萬事吉祥all the best.



Fig.3: bangwen 榜文 in Yancheng Nuo ritual

### God's representation and Resonance between Heaven and Men

Paintings pictures of gods and paper tablets with written names of deities in three realms installed on the altar are venerated in Yancheng Nuo practice. Three realms, namely, heaven, earth, and man, explained in cosmography where natural and supernatural are not separated; suggest a fusion between time and space which determines mutual responsiveness of heaven and man (Sertdemir,2021,p. 216). Human beings traditionally know themselves through the images of their gods (Cassirer, 1955, 199, 217–218). From the earliest times, the Chinese people have perceived the unseen power, felt it and worshipped it. Arthur Wolf 1974 essay about Chinese popular religion described the gods (in the eyes of the peasants) as part of a supernatural bureaucracy, reflecting its earthly imperial counterpart (1974: 133-45). Wolf (1978) has argued that there are three systems in Chinese folk religion: gods (who symbolize the empire's officials), ghosts (who symbolize dangerous strangers), and ancestors (who symbolize one's own people). People burn paper offerings to the gods to give thanks for blessings or to beg for assistance in times of need; to the ancestors and departed relatives to express love and devotion; and to the ghosts to ease the sufferings of these unknown and neglected dead.

Base on the erected god paintings depicted by local folk artists on the altar and deities with names written on bangwen, it is worth noting that nature gods, ancestral spirits, and household gods, altogether at least 45 gods are mentioned. In contrast with monotheism, Chinese people worship different deities spontaneously not limited to the same religious system. People give offerings to please ancestors, deified person and benevolent deities, and give thanks for blessings or beg for assistance in times of need. Gods and goddesses with supernatural power are equally worshipped by the worshippers. Huang summarized five main features of polytheistic religions: lack of absolutist beliefs; instrumental orientation; high level of inclusiveness; pursuit of supernatural power and gender equality (2019, p. 60). In terms of Yancheng indigenous folk religious system, it is noticeable that it overlaps Chinese folk religious system which the deities from three strands, namely, Buddhism, Taoism and popular belief, from humanity's original ancestors in Chinese mythology, such as fuxi(伏羲), heavenly emperor and empress, such as yuhuang dadi(玉皇大帝Jade emperor), wangmu niangniang(王母娘娘Queen mother of the West), an aide of the Jade Emperor taibai jinxing (太白金星Great white golden star), the disciple of Queen mother of the West, jitian xuannü (九天玄女Mysterious maid of the highest heavens), to righteous military generals, such as Liumeng general (刘猛将军 the god of insects), and Bodhisattvas.

### Transformation from Intangible Signs to Tangible Signs

The *Dao De Jing* states, "Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is." Youlan Feng (1983) identified five meanings of tian天: (1) a material or physical 'tian' or sky; (2) a ruling or presiding 'tian', which is anthropomorphic god; (3) a fatalistic 'tian', which is similar to fate; (4) a naturalistic 'tien' that is equivalent to nature; and (5) an ethical 'tian', which means the moral principle.

According to Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, symbol is "a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us" (Jung, 1964, p. 20). A symbol does not have to be a material object. Geometric shapes, colors, animals, body organs or body parts, gestures, events, spatial units, relationships, and activities are among the myriad objects that can become symbols. Turner considered symbols to be the "molecules" of rituals (Turner 2004, 26).

### 3. Discussion & Conclusion

Yancheng Nuo event is a manifestation of local culture and local people's psychology. Its purpose is to ward off disaster or pestilence and pray for blessing. Yancheng is located in the Huanghuai alluvial plain. Historically, it has suffered from natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, and locusts. The special geographical condition has formed a unique ritual culture, which engages the public in a collective psychological experience. Nuo practice is condensed with various sign systems, which fully express the customs and beliefs of the local people. With the help of semiotics, it is quite easy to examine the folk religious beliefs, lifestyle, customs involved in Yancheng Nuo.

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