

NUO-EMOTION: A CULTURAL JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL RETURN

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The first time I came across the word 'Nuo' was due to a cross-cultural project called 'ArtCross/ Danscross' based respectively in London and Beijing. In this project, Chinese scholar, choreographer Guo Lei was presenting his latest work *Mask* which was themed 'Leaving Home-Elsewhere'. Subsequently, I saw the original folk dance 'Nuo' in the Shiyou Village of Jiangxi Province. I was with the dancers of Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) who returned home soon after the world premiere of *MASK* in

London. That was a special visit. In Shiyou, the 'Rural Nuo' we saw is considered to be the living fossil which we have inherited today. It left us with a unique impression, especially Nuo Dance, a kind of dance in which the village dancers wear Nuo Masks that represent gods. Fortunately, I participated in the director Guo Lei's research and creative practice of *NUO-EMOTION* funded by the National Art Fund. In the two years following, as the project team visited the villages for field studies and collected more and

more materials of the original 'Nuo', I came to know it more and more.

"Do not hastily deny what you cannot understand"

On the road of our first field study, the director Guo Lei introduced us in detail to the history and characteristics of Rural Nuo in Shiyou Village. He also talked about his feelings about it. However, at that time, what captured our attention more was the idyllic scenery outside the car

1 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion - Act Seven - Harmony and Prosperity*
2 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion - Act Two - Life Creation*
3 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion - Act Six - Honest and Sincere*



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windows rather than the things he was referring to.

As the car sped through a forest of trees laden with small oranges, that stretched for dozens of kilometers, we approached the small old temple in Shiyou Village. We were deeply touched by the scene in the village: crowing cocks, barking dogs and curling smoke. When we entered the temple, I found that elements of ethnic migration and cultural integration which are rooted in our ancient history were manifested here in such a simple and vivid way. The warm-hearted villagers brought us the masks representing different local gods, such as Kai Shan, Guan Gong, Zhong Kui, Lei Gong, and Nuo Grandpa-grandma. The contents of the Nuo dance in the Nuo ceremony were also richer

and more exciting. Immersed in such an environment, the visitors on the spot, who were all urban residents, felt the atmosphere of Nuo in the temple: that the human and divine world are in harmony with each other and that people and gods are getting along with each other happily.

Even now, I still remember clearly that the two Nuo Uncles in charge of accompaniment sat on a long bench because they were very old; one was holding a drum and the other one was holding a gong. At the moment of drumming, my tears burst out! I had never expected this and I could not understand it either at that time. The experience was inexplicable. However, it was unforgettable as well. The techniques of gongs- and drums-playing of the two Nuo

Uncles were very simple. They just repeated the same beats like a long-lasting jingle and call. At the same time, I deeply understood the huge limitations of language and writing and those of our eyes and imaginations. The Nuo Gods in the legends handed down for thousands of years, connected with the people through Nuo Masks, sinister in appearance, so that they could solemnly and sacredly launch their romantic sacrifice ceremony. During the ceremony by the Nuo Uncles, my insides seemed to be asking me how long I have been away from my home and become lost. Suddenly, the words of the director on our way to Shiyou Village came into my mind: "Do not hastily deny what you cannot understand."

It seems that we who have lived in

1 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion* - Act Three - *Good Weather for the Crops*
2 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion* - Act Five - *Emotion for God and Ghost*



the cities for a long time are unaware of the phenomenon that we are losing our connection with traditions and nature. It is evident that when most people subconsciously use unconsciously material means to solve spiritual problems and rely only on the visible 'outcome' to judge the value, we may not be able to draw more powerful spiritual energy from our own traditional culture to help us deal with the problems now and in the future.

Long-lost gratitude and awe

In the Spring Festival of 2014, our

"*NUO-EMOTION*" project team had the chance to visit Shiyou Village Jiangxi Province again. This time, we deliberately decided to experience truly and fully the 'Rural Nuo' of Shiyou Village during the most important traditional festival in China. The Temple of Nuo looked like the center of the carnival in my eyes. It was smoke-filled. Villagers gathered at the Temple of Nuo with piety and respect. Particularly on night of the fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar year, the Nuo ritual was especially solemn before the "Sou Nuo". What power has made

- 1 > Members of the Nuo opera group offer sacrifices at a temple
- 2 > Folk artists were performing at Nuo opera in Shiyou Village
- 3 > The chief director was asking the Nuo Opera actors for advice
- 4 > Folk artists of Nuo opera perform Zhong Kui
- 5 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion* - Act Six - *Honest and Sincere*



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- 1 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion - Act Four - Life and Growth*
- 2 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion - Act Four - Creation of the World*
- 3 > The Nuo temple is filled with a happy atmosphere in which the human world blends with the divine world and people interact closely with God
- 4 > Art collection site of *Nuo-Emotion*: Nuo temple, Shiyou village, Nanfeng County, Jiangxi Province

the Nuo culture so enduring over thousands of years?

The whole process of the Rural Nuo of Shiyou Village includes 'Qi Nuo, Tiao Nuo, Sou Nuo and Yuan Nuo'. Of them, Tiao Nuo represents the form of dance that is the main part of the dance of the entire ritual. In this ritual, I was impressed and touched deeply by two details. Firstly, that during Yuan Nuo, in the last step of the the entire ritual that went through the Spring Festival, all the Nuo Uncles dancing with the Nuo masks were kneeling on the ground in front of the Nuo Gods once again in the

Temple of Nuo. At the same time, the oldest Nuo Uncle was reading respectfully many names which were written on the paper, who were donors from every family in Shiyou Village for the ritual held this year. In total, there were more than a hundred families. In my opinion, it looked very like a big family respectfully reporting to the ancestors and gods who always protected everyone.

The other one is that at the end of the ritual of "Rural Nuo", the masks of the Nuo Gods were put back into two boxes by one of the Nuo Uncles, and the boxes

were put in the Nuo temple for sealing. The boxes would be unpacked in the next New Year. I thought that all the rituals had come to a conclusion. However, several Nuo Uncles brought the cooked rice and dishes and went to the fields on foot. They arrived at an old grave mound and started, solemnly, a small ritual in another style to worship the Ancestor of Nuo Uncle. Then, the traditional ritual of "Rural Nuo" in the Spring Festival had come to an end. After several days of stay in the Shiyou Village, an empathy which arose in my mind told me that the 'respect' and



> Group photo of artists of Nuo class in Shiyou village. The whole process of Nuo sacrifice in Shiyou village includes "Qi Nuo, Tiao Nuo, Sou Nuo and Yuan Nuo". Nuo dance is the main form to enrich the whole sacrificial ceremony.

1 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion* - Act Five - *Emotion for God and Ghost*

'love' among the family members was shown in this simple commemoration.

Commemorating ancestors and worshiping gods have always been the core content of Chinese traditional culture. This simple education has built a solid cultural foundation for Chinese culture for thousands of years.

From the earliest research on Nuo to the creative work of *NUO-LOVE*, the director Guo Lei kept reminding us of remaining grateful and respectful to the Nuo culture and folk customs. Based on such research and creation of requirements, our team established a deep friendship with the Nuo Uncles of the Shiyou Village. We started an artistic exploration, which is an interaction between nowadays and

the past, between the traditional and modern arts. It is also with gratitude and awe that the author can gain insight into the hidden power of the culture from the perspective of the dance.

Life is a ritual

In the research and creation of *NUO-EMOTION*, the 'ritual' is particularly valued by director Guo Lei. He fully respects the unique sense of sacredness in the ritual of "Rural Nuo". Therefore, he encouraged every member of the team to follow the ritual tradition to implement researching and choreographing of *NUO-EMOTION*.

Regarding the Nuo, I think that a ritual like the Rural Nuo should no longer be considered as a superstitious behavior. But, on the

contrary, we should question the excessive confidence of human scientism. After all, we cannot ignore the rituals that contain so many unspoken things as well as indivisible harmony and unity. We have reason to believe that a ritual that is passed down for thousands of years must contain some critical elements which could help human beings survive, generation by generation. From my personal experience, I feel my soul was purified in the Nuo of ritual.

On the stage, when the Nuo Uncles from Shiyou Village and the young dancers of Beijing Dance Academy were dancing together, they were in harmony, which is unbelievable and amazing. At that moment, the tradition and the modernity were integrated into this creative work. The feelings expressed by the dance sublimated the performance





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and the dance techniques were not the focus anymore. At that moment, the bodies of the dancers became so poetic, when we saw the Nuo Masks put on the faces and taken off repeatedly, we felt that the long-lost soul returned to our body.

The rituals of our lives, on stage or in our real life, will never stop.

Cultural perspective in research and development

NUO-EMOTION is a research-led creative work after director Guo Lei's series of works: *MASK* and *NUO-MASK*. Such works were considered as 'Research-led Creative Works' by director Guo Lei, due to the thinking based

on Beijing Dance Academy's goal of cultivating talents in the system of Chinese dance higher education. He believes that in the choreography of BDA, the novel interpretation and development of Chinese culture is the primary task. The purpose of the director is to arouse students' reflection on the essence behind the cultural phenomena to encourage some more open and explorative artistic creations.

The research and creation of *NUO-EMOTION* focuses on the Rural Nuo of Shiyou Village. I think that it has broken the old conceptions and built a new form. The director and choreographers did not consider themselves as 'cultural savers', but genuinely wanted

to adopt some anthropological research approaches in the field study so as to perfectly combine their active talents and the profound Nuo culture. The new form juxtaposes the Nuo Uncles, who represent the tradition, and the elite dancers of BDA on the same stage. Such a creative form highlights the emotional connection, stimulates more surprises, eliminates the boundary between the traditional and the modern, and dissolves the differences between the performance and the rituals. As for the dance style, the dancers' body-language somehow overcame the limits of over-skill and academism. Probably, it benefited from the complexity of the confliction and integration of both body

1-2 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo-Emotion* - Ending. Nuo opera artists put their clothes and masks into boxes. The whole process is pious and full of a sense of ceremony

languages, of exquisiteness and plainness. Just like those Nuo Masks, the softness behind the ugliness, the goodness behind the fierceness and the naivety behind the weirdness....

The traditional Chinese aesthetic idea, "Meaning grasped imageries forgotten", is a perfect interpretation of conscious innovation. This traditional idea promotes a kind of freedom from the form without losing the cultural foundation and spiritual responses. This is why the audiences would not feel that the

dance is alienated from the original Rural Nuo, even with so many newly-created body-languages. In my opinion, this new way of exploring showed the director's attitude of using research and creation in dealing with the intangible cultural heritage: interpreting the culture in the name of art but not judging the culture as an artistic authority.

Conclusion

Approaching Nuo means entering the spiritual world of our ancestors;

approaching Nuo means entering the ancient culture. It is simply this strong cultural attraction that connected us deeply, and with love, to Nuo.

Asking 'who am I?' is an eternal theme for human beings. We define ourselves better through our own culture and understand ourselves better by knowing the differences between different cultures. By nourishing our traditional culture, our creation will continue to contribute to our long-standing culture.

1 > 2014 intangible cultural heritage research and creation repertoire *Nuo Emotion* - Ending. In a journey of spiritual return, learning to understand culture with emotional experience and connect the relationship between man and the world with artistic intuition is a window opened by Nuo in our life

