Blooming Seasons: The Art of Creating Traditional-Based Contemporary Dance

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Abstract

As one of the representative traditional dances of Hunan Province, China, Mayang Huadeng faces the challenge of integrating into contemporary society while preserving its cultural heritage. Taking innovation as the starting point, this research explores the creation of contemporary dance based on traditional Mayang Huadeng through practical investigation and artistic creation. The study examines traditional creative methods of Mayang Huadeng and develops contemporary dance works grounded in these traditions, ultimately establishing an approach for creating contemporary dance art rooted in traditional forms. Data collection involved literature review and fieldwork utilizing interviews and observations as primary research instruments. The researchers conducted creative practice research employing focus groups to gather expert feedback on the choreographic process. Through comprehensive analysis, this study presents a methodology for creating contemporary dance art that honors tradition while embracing innovation. The resulting dance work, 'Blooming Seasons,' demonstrates how traditional elements can be transformed through creative adaptation of movement vocabulary, innovative development of traditional forms, and balanced integration of collective heritage with individual artistic expression. This research contributes to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation by proposing practical strategies for revitalizing traditional dance forms to meet contemporary aesthetic expectations while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Keywords: Mayang huadeng, Traditional-based contemporary dance, Blooming seasons, Creative transformation, Intangible cultural heritage

Introduction

Huadeng represents one of the quintessential Han Chinese folk dance forms in southern China. Specifically, Mayang Huadeng flourishes in Mayang Miao Autonomous County, Hunan Province, embodying a unique synthesis of Han and Miao cultural traditions. Traditionally performed by male-female pairs with women portraying 'Deng Guniang' (Lantern Girl) and men enacting 'Lai Huazi' (Flower Boy) these performances encompass themes of ritual celebration, romantic expression, and communal entertainment. During the Chinese New Year period, Huadeng troupes traverse communities performing festive greetings, as captured in the traditional saying: 'A set of gongs and drums, a row of Huadeng. They pick up their fans and go out. Thousands of firecrackers come to greet them, and they sing from the first night to the fifth night.' This jingle illustrates the profound affection communities historically held for Huadeng performances (Miao et al., 2023).

However, rapid social development, modernization, and urbanization have dramatically transformed the cultural and ecological environment supporting Mayang Huadeng. The art form faces increasing endangerment and developmental challenges, including declining numbers of performing artists, insufficient successors, limited repertoire preservation, lagging theoretical research, and stagnant innovation in performance content and form. As contemporary entertainment options proliferate, traditional performing arts struggle to maintain audience engagement. Multiple factors contribute to this predicament: the accelerated pace of modern life, the influence of foreign dance forms such as street dance and K-pop, the perceived incompatibility between traditional aesthetics and contemporary preferences, youth migration for employment opportunities, career diversification, and the resulting succession crisis. Consequently, Mayang Huadeng increasingly diverges from contemporary lived experience. While dedicated inheritors and veteran artists continue their preservation efforts, traditional dance styles alone cannot satisfy the aesthetic expectations of contemporary youth. Failure to address innovation in the current era will only widen the inheritance gap in future generations.

The inheritance and development of Mayang Huadeng have entered a new era, requiring deep consideration of inheritance protection and innovative development.' As a traditional Chinese folk dance that has endured millennia of cultural evolution while remaining embedded in community practice, Mayang Huadeng clearly demonstrates significant influence and value. However, when traditional dance serves solely purposes of social entertainment, physical exercise, and ritual worship, it inadequately addresses modern aesthetic needs and lifestyle requirements. Contemporary stewardship must balance two imperatives: preserving historical continuity and facilitating future evolution. In an era emphasizing cultural confidence, practitioners must articulate both traditional cultural connotations and practical contemporary value. Innovation grounded in tradition, responsive to temporal changes and iterative development, prevents cultural obsolescence and disappearance. From this perspective, innovation emerges organically from traditional bottlenecks, with inheritance itself constituting a process of continuous creation (Yana et al., 2024). Integrating traditional performing arts into contemporary life requires enabling traditional dance to meet evolving aesthetic expectations. Beyond encouraging local inheritors to maintain traditional forms, artists must engage in what Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) term 'inventing traditions' creating contemporary dance works grounded in traditional foundations that resonate with present-day aesthetics. By leaving traces in current historical stages, practitioners achieve the dual objectives of tradition preservation and innovation.

Luna and Shuib (2025) emphasize that 'it is particularly crucial to explore and establish research methods applicable to Mayang Huadeng, which must both deeply explore its unique artistic charm and cultural connotations while providing strong academic support and practical guidance for its inheritance and development.' Through comprehensive study of Mayang Huadeng, researchers have identified substantial prototypes amenable to re-creation with new connotations and aesthetics. Works such as 'October Flowers,' 'December Tea Picking,' and 'Flowers Bloom in All Seasons' demonstrate elegant refinement; 'The Widow's Tune' features prominent narrative elements; 'Welcoming the Bride' and 'The Female Militia of Xiangshan Mountain' offer varied thematic content. While seemingly disconnected from contemporary social life, these works retain emotional cores and distinctive movement vocabularies with complete formal structures. Through artistic processing and innovation, they possess potential for what He (2020) describes as achieving 'new singing of old opera.'

Practice facilitates theory formation, which in turn guides subsequent practice. This study begins with the cultural roots of Mayang Huadeng, progressing systematically through data collection, creative practice, and performance feedback to analyze innovative approaches to traditional dance. Compared to conventional art production, this process demands greater complexity, yet only through such rigor can truly effective pathways emerge. This methodology differs fundamentally from 'fast-food style' artistic creation, addressing the gap in practical methodology within creative theory.



Figure 1 The traditional dance "Mayang Huadeng**"**
(Source: Mayang government website)

Research Objective

To study the contemporary development pathways of the traditional dance Mayang Huadeng.

Methodology

For the first research objective, the researcher conducted literature review and fieldwork for data collection. Research instruments included interviews and observations with key informants such as choreographers, inheritors, and performers.

For the second research objective, the researcher conducted creative practice study, utilizing focus groups to collect expert feedback before public performance.

For the third research objective, the researcher conducted comprehensive analysis based on empirical results to establish principles for creating traditional-based contemporary dance.

Literature Review

Research on the Historical Evolution of Mayang Huadeng

In the articles "Mayang Huadeng Opera (Provincial Cultural Education Department , 2013): A Miao Village's 'Duet' Enriches Colorful Life" published by the Provincial Cultural Education Department, and "The 'Southern Duet' Mayang Miao Huadeng" by Li Qiang and Yang Guopeng, the authors reconstruct the trajectory of Mayang's basin gourd culture through local chronicles, Huadeng lyrics, local historical materials, and oral histories. They highlight its rich content and widespread regional presence, emphasizing its deep historical and cultural value, unique artistic aesthetic, and practical societal utility. Despite the legends suggesting that Huadeng opera existed since the Tang Dynasty, there is no factual evidence to support this, with folklore being the sole source of its origins. On the Historical Evolution and Human Ecological Protection of Mayang Huadeng," analyzes the historical changes of Mayang Huadeng from perspectives of geographical conditions, and the evolution of economic and cultural aspects. It argues that Mayang's unique geographical location made it a strategic military post for feudal rulers for a long time. The stationed soldiers, primarily of Han ethnicity, interacted extensively with the local Miao people. Over time, due to Han migration and intermarriages with the Miao, a fusion of Miao and Han cultures emerged, leading to the long-standing tradition of Mayang Huadeng (Zhao et al., 2024). The Inheritance and Transformation of Mayang Miao Huadeng Opera," discusses how Mayang Huadeng is the progenitor of Xiangxi Huadeng. Historical accounts note that as early as the Southern Song Dynasty, Lu You had described how locals in Xiangxi went to town to watch Huadeng during the New Year and other festivals. By the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with an influx of outsiders, local people began to perform Han operas, Nuotang plays, and Yang operas on holidays. Eventually, the modern form of Mayang Huadeng opera emerged during the Qing Dynasty, under the reign of Emperor Guangxu (Jian & Nicolas, 2021).

Research on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Inheritance and Development of Mayang Huadeng Opera," the author outlines the historical context of the Huadeng opera and offers recommendations for its inheritance and development. Firstly, it is suggested that the provincial government allocates special funds from the national intangible cultural heritage protection funds to support the Mayang Huadeng theatre troupe annually. Secondly, the government should expedite the creation of a long-term mechanism to support national intangible cultural heritage local opera types, specify more detailed local financial support, and develop related preferential policies. Thirdly, the government should promote Huadeng opera within the community, especially encouraging performances in schools (Lin, 2025). Study on the Disconnection in the Inheritance and Development of Mayang Miao Autonomous County's Huadeng Opera" (1994) examines the various issues encountered during the inheritance process of the intangible heritage Huadeng opera. By investigating the current state of Huadeng opera development and inheritance in Mayang County, the study identifies reasons for its decline and factors affecting its development and inheritance, aiming to establish mechanisms for its protection and continuation (Zhang et al., 2022).

Folkloristic Study of Mayang Huadeng

From a folkloristic perspective, the article "Beautiful Folk Song and Dance—Playing with Huadeng mainly introduces the performance forms of Mayang Huadeng. The content often promotes Confucian rituals, and celebrates love and life, serving as a folk activity for extending New Year greetings and blessings (Liu & Chuangprakhon, 2024). This highlights the role of Mayang Huadeng in festival celebrations and its function in transmitting cultural

values and social messages. The Cultural Blend of Miao and Han in Mayang Huadeng" takes the New Year's Huadeng in Mayang as a starting point, discussing the customs related to Huadeng, the organizational forms of Huadeng groups, the making of lanterns, classifications of Huadeng, and Huadeng music. It also addresses the current state of Miao-Han cultural integration, reflecting the customs, human relationships, and unique characteristics of the ethnicity and region (Wang, 2015).

Study of the Artistic Forms and Characteristics of Mayang Huadeng

On the Artistic Forms and Characteristics of the Mayang Miao 'Huadeng Opera' in Western Hunan focuses on the artistic forms and styles of the "Huadeng Opera" itself. It categorizes the repertoire of the Mayang Miao Huadeng Opera, analyzes the modal scales used in the music, and partly discusses the content and form of performances, including props and costumes. Meanwhile, Li Jing's "The Artistic Characteristics of Dance Music in Mayang Huadeng" centers on dance movement analysis, describing how dance uniquely manifests in the music of "Huadeng Opera" with singing, dancing, and acting, creating a vibrant and diverse performance (Hongxian & Yodwised, 2023). In summary, although relatively few articles discuss the artistic forms and features of Mayang Huadeng, those that do often describe the performance contexts as part of broader discussions on the origins and historical evolution of Huadeng opera. Moreover, as Mayang Huadeng has evolved, it has increasingly incorporated local cultural performances, thus transforming into more of a scenic depiction. This has led to a more ambiguous analysis of traditional artistic characteristics, blending them with broader cultural expressions and making the traditional forms less distinct. This evolution reflects the adaptive and evolving nature of folk arts as they interact with changing cultural dynamics and societal needs. The aforementioned literature primarily summarizes historical and cultural contexts, rarely documenting the performances of inheritors and artists, nor does it explore the historical development of Mayang Huadeng. Researchers are needed to conduct more comprehensive analyses, such as analyzing photographic and audiovisual materials, or interviewing folk artists, to further gather data.

Results

1. The dilemma in the inheritance of Mayang Huadeng

In past research on the historical evolution and changes of Mayang Huadeng, studies were primarily based on local chronicles, local histories, and oral histories. These studies placed the art form within a temporal context to analyze the circumstances of Mayang Huadeng in each era. Although there has been considerable effort to trace the overall evolution of the Mayang Miao Huadeng opera, there has been little in-depth exploration of the reasons behind these transformations. Without a profound analysis of the reasons and results of the cultural changes of Mayang Huadeng, it is difficult to make accurate and valuable judgments on the protection and inheritance of the art form, thus recommendations for the development paths of its inheritance lack specificity.

From the perspective of folklore studies, although it is possible to see the full picture of the Huadeng opera, there is insufficient focus on its development and protection. In the analyses from the perspectives of musicology and dance studies, which begin to touch on the vitality of Mayang Huadeng through ontological analysis, there is a scarcity of existing materials, and more emphasis is often placed on descriptions of the form, features, and scenes of the Huadeng. There are almost no proposals on how to start with the ontology of Mayang Huadeng, combining social and cultural factors, and there is a lack of effective protection and inheritance development research.



Figure 2 Researchers collect historical information from inheritors (Source: Researcher, 2025)

2. Obstacles in the Development of Mayang Huadeng

As an intangible cultural heritage, Mayang Huadeng continuously confronts "modernization," which also presents obstacles in the methods of inheritance and economic investment. Firstly, there is a conflict with the times. As the economy and technology rapidly advance, Mayang Huadeng faces challenges in competing with "modernization." Many young people are now pursuing "short, frequent, fast" entertainment activities, significantly reducing the number of participants and spectators of Huadeng. How to make the art form interesting to the new generation and to encourage active participation in its dissemination and inheritance is a visible problem, yet difficult to address effectively.

Secondly, the modes of inheritance are limited. In the traditional social structure, the master-apprentice relationship was akin to a parental relationship, influenced by the feudal notion of passing skills only to males, which meant many female learners could not formally enter the lineage of inheritors. This directly affected the scope and number of inheritors. In recent years, policies have encouraged both men and women to learn from inheritors and become the next generation of inheritors, but this has not had a significant effect in practice, as most young people go out to study or work and rarely stay in the county to learn the art, leading to a lack of successors for Mayang Huadeng.

Thirdly, there is insufficient economic investment. In a market economy, whether it is the government or investors, focus is typically placed first on projects with high returns, wide benefits, and quick results. The development of intangible cultural heritage remains at a basic standard, leading to very limited incomes for inheritors, performers, choreographers, and even theatre troupes involved in Mayang Huadeng. They cannot sustain themselves on wages or government subsidies alone and must devote more energy to solving income issues, which directly affects the development of Mayang Huadeng.



Figure 3 Researchers interviewing inheritors at the Mayang Huadeng Theatre Troupe (Source: Researcher, 2025)

3. Contemporary Development Pathways for Mayang Huadeng

Balancing Theory and Practice: Mayang Huadeng carries a wealth of content and broad significance. To more completely represent the Huadeng opera in written form, it is first necessary to describe its artistic forms in detail and change the mode of transmission from "oral" to "written." Simultaneously, there should be a focus on the results of practical applications to achieve innovative development of Mayang Huadeng, making it dynamic in its transmission and increasing the artistic quality of the dance works to align with contemporary aesthetics, thus attracting more young people.

Improving the Economic Income of Inheritors: Addressing the salary issues of inheritors is crucial. Adequate life assurance would allow them to devote more time and energy to inheritance activities. Expanding the number and scope of inheritors by shifting from individual development of apprentices to official selection processes and fostering a value-oriented approach that takes pride in becoming an inheritor can also help.

Increasing Government Support: In addition to achieving annual goals, government departments can use a project-based approach to create cultural industries, attract commercial investments, and bring income to individuals involved in Mayang Huadeng while boosting tourism and economic development. Using new media and multiple channels for widespread dissemination, such as online and television media platforms, can enhance the social impact of Mayang Huadeng, especially during festivals and organized events to generate public discussion and traffic.

Strengthen school-local collaboration and educational outreach. By collaborating with local primary and secondary schools, universities, and professional art schools, incorporate Mayang Huadeng into the curriculum, offering specialized courses and practical instruction in Huadeng, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and love of traditional culture among young people. Encouraging students to participate in the creation, rehearsal, and performance of Mayang Huadeng will not only improve their performance skills but also deepen their identification with local culture. Furthermore, "Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance Bases" or "Mayang Huadeng Workshops" could be established, bringing in professional instructors for systematic instruction and cultivating a group of promising young successors.

Promote cross-sector integration and industrial expansion. Integrate Mayang Huadeng with tourism, cultural and creative industries, film and television, and fashion to develop cultural and creative products with local characteristics, such as lantern-themed handicrafts, clothing and accessories, animated shorts, and stage plays, expanding its expression and market potential. Beyond theatrical performances, night tourism, intangible cultural heritage markets, and immersive experiences could be integrated to create diversified consumption scenarios and enhance cultural added value. This not only enhances the sustainable development capabilities of Mayang Huadeng, but also makes them closer to people's lives and market demands.

Discussions

Through the study of the historical evolution and current state of the traditional dance Mayang Huadeng, this research proposes contemporary development pathways: balancing theory and practice, improving the economic income of inheritors, and increasing government support. Initial literature research revealed a multi-dimensional organization and analysis of Mayang Huadeng's history, changes, and artistic characteristics from various perspectives, including its status as an intangible cultural heritage and studies from folklore, musicology, and dance perspectives. Based on this, the study focused on analyzing the cultural concepts and aesthetic standards that have changed over the decades, identifying the challenges faced in inheritance. This is consistent with research of Wilcox (2018) Study of dynamic inheritance: representative works and the authoring of tradition in chinese dance. And consistent with

research of Zong et al. (2025) study of the impact mechanism of Chinese higher folk dance education on the traditional national cultural inheritance and innovation among young universities students: a deep exploration. The research also revealed the positive promotion of folk dance education on universities students' national pride and cultural confidence, as well as their role in promoting cultural inheritance and innovation.

Field research involved in-depth investigations and first-hand data collection from local cultural institutions and interviews with inheritors, performers, and directors, providing a detailed understanding of why young people are no longer willing to learn the craft voluntarily and analyzing the realistic obstacles to the development of Mayang Huadeng: conflicts with modern times, limited inheritance methods, and insufficient economic investment. These are details that are not easily examined through books, documents, or online reports, adding significant research value.

Finally, the study proposes contemporary development pathways for Mayang Huadeng. It suggests strategies from economic, cultural, and governmental support perspectives, hoping to transform theory into practice, promote protection through inheritance, and aid development with support, ultimately forming a beneficial cycle at the societal level. The study also aims to initiate discussions, identify innovative and focal points, and promote the artistic creation of Mayang Huadeng, producing artworks that highlight core values and achieve the goal of dynamic inheritance and development. Furthermore, there have been studies on the inheritance, development, and promotion of the artistic creation of traditional dance. Such as, Huang, (2024) to explore the artistic, cultural and education characteristics and inheritance of dance in of music and dance of silk road in the han and tang dynasties. Mackerras (1992) study of integration and the dramas of China's minorities. Huang (2025) study of transforming dance education in China: enhancing sustainable development and cultural preservation. Mao & Potiwetchakul (2025) study the movement characteristic and cultural connotation of gujiazi in anhui huagudeng dance. Symbolizing joy and enthusiasm for life. Additionally, it fosters community cohesion, represents historical continuity, and embodies auspiciousness and well-wishing, reflecting the rich local heritage and cultural values of Anhui.

Conclusion and suggestions

Conclusion

This research establishes a comprehensive methodology for creating contemporary dance grounded in traditional forms, addressing the critical challenge of intangible cultural heritage preservation through active innovation. The study demonstrates that Mayang Huadeng, despite facing contemporary challenges, possesses substantial potential for creative transformation when approached through systematic analysis of traditional creative methods, rigorous artistic practice, and thoughtful integration of contemporary aesthetics.

The three-stage creative process pre-production organization, production refinement, and post-production evaluation provides a replicable framework applicable beyond Mayang Huadeng to other endangered traditional performing arts. The resulting dance work 'Blooming Seasons' exemplifies how traditional materials can undergo creative transformation, traditional forms can receive innovative development, and individual artistic expression can honor collective cultural heritage while meeting contemporary expectations.

Suggestion

This study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application of cultural heritage preservation. Theoretically, it bridges the gap between traditional preservation discourse and contemporary creative practice, demonstrating that 'inventing traditions' need not compromise cultural authenticity when grounded in rigorous research and respectful

innovation. Practically, it offers choreographers, cultural institutions, and policymakers a tested methodology for revitalizing traditional dance forms.

Future research should examine audience reception across different demographic groups, explore digital preservation and dissemination technologies, investigate economic sustainability models for traditional dance troupes, and analyze application of these creative principles to other regional and ethnic dance traditions. As China continues emphasizing cultural confidence and creative transformation of traditional culture, methodologies such as those developed in this study will prove increasingly valuable for ensuring that invaluable cultural heritage remains vibrant, relevant, and accessible to contemporary and future generations.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

The paper explores the historical inheritance and cultural innovation derived from the Haihunhou archaeological site in China. It connects ancient heritage with modern cultural and creative product design, emphasizing how traditional knowledge can be reimagined in the present-day context.

The paper presents "new knowledge" not only as abstract academic output but as a transformative force that reshapes how communities relate to their past, present, and future. By creatively engaging with archaeological findings, it provides a vision of culture as both a legacy and a resource, generating social cohesion, economic opportunity, and aesthetic enrichment.

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