

Dance Characteristics of the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns

Zhang Gang

Performing Arts of Doctor of Philosophy program, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts,
Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: zhangxiao.1997513@gmail.com

Phakamas Jirajarupat

Asst. Prof. (Dr.) Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University,
Thailand

E-mail: phakamas.ji@ssru.ac.th

Qianqiu Jin

Prof. (Dr.) Jiangnan Vocational College of Media Arts, China

Abstract

Located in Nanyang, south-western Henan, Zhenping lies at the junction of the Central Plains and the Jingchu region, where agricultural civilisation and diverse folk customs have long coexisted and intermingled. As a Henan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage folk lantern dance, the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns serve as a quintessential artistic vehicle for the Central Plains’ rural festive culture and the spirit of neighbourhood community. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, drawing upon the folk transmission channels of Lantern Festival processions and temple fair parades, and integrating Central Plains festival formations, Nanyang folk tunes and auspicious folk customs, it has gradually evolved into a composite lantern dance art form that unites dance, vocal styles, props and ritual. Taking the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns as its core subject, this paper employs four research methods: literature review, field research, semi-structured interviews with inheritors, and on-site video observation, analysing its artistic characteristics of folk fusion from four dimensions—historical context, costumes and props, performance forms, and contemporary contextual innovation. It interprets the cultural logic by which rural societies in the Central Plains utilise lantern dances to achieve blessings, moral education and community cohesion, thereby providing empirical reference for the living transmission and modern innovation of folk lantern dances in the Central Plains.

Keywords: Central Plains folklore, Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns, folk lantern dance

Introduction

Zhenping, Nanyang, Henan, is situated at the southern foot of the Funiu Mountains within the watershed of a tributary of the Han River. It lies at the transitional zone where Central Plains and Jingchu cultures converge, and has preserved agricultural festival traditions and Lantern Festival customs for over a thousand years. The Zhenping Nine-Lotus Lanterns, also known as ‘Matching Flower Lanterns’, originated in Dachenying Village, Gaoqiu Town, Zhenping County. As a folk lantern dance rooted in the local Lantern Festival folk performance tradition, it embodies the seasonal rituals, blessings and beliefs, and



memories of rural ethics in south-western Henan. Cultural exchanges within the Central Plains region have always been frequent, with temple fairs, markets and festive processions serving as channels for the exchange of folk art; the Nine Lotus Lanterns were precisely nurtured and took shape within this environment of cultural fusion in the Central Plains.

The Central Plains boast a wealth of folk lantern dance traditions, with lanterns and festival processions in various regions each possessing distinct local characteristics. However, the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns differ from other lantern dances: centred on the number ‘nine’ as a symbolic core, featuring lotus-shaped lanterns as their signature props, and drawing on the folk legend of the Nine Immortal Maidens as its narrative backbone, it fulfils multiple functions including ritual worship, neighbourhood celebrations and moral education. With the advancement of intangible cultural heritage protection, the integration of culture and tourism, and the promotion of aesthetic education in schools, the Nine Lotus Lanterns have moved from their original setting in village Lantern Festival celebrations to public squares, theatres, school campuses and television stages, creating a striking contrast between traditional folk forms and contemporary stage adaptations.

Research Objectives

1. To trace the development of the Nine Lotus Lanterns of Zhenping.
2. To analyse the artistic characteristics of the dance associated with the Nine Lotus Lanterns of Zhenping, a representative lantern dance of south-western Henan.

Scope of the Research

1. Population Scope

The subject of this study is limited to the ‘Nine Lotus Lanterns’ of Zhenping County, Henan Province, encompassing forms such as authentic village performances, stage productions and school-based performances. Research materials include props and costumes, performance repertoires, video footage and interview transcripts with practitioners.

2. Variable Scope

This paper treats the fusion of regional folk customs as the independent variable, the various artistic characteristics of the Nine Lotus Lanterns as the dependent variable, and the performance context as the mediating variable; by isolating irrelevant social factors, it explores the intrinsic relationship between these two elements.

3. Time Scope

The temporal scope traces back to the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty, when the Nine Lotus Lanterns originated, with field research focusing on the period from 2018 to 2025, during which the tradition underwent a phase of diversification.

Literature Review

Centred on the research topic ‘Dance Characteristics of the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns’, and with the core objective of ‘interpreting the complete artistic system of the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns’, this paper organises existing research findings into three main dimensions.



1. Research on Central Plains Shehuo and Folk Lantern Dances

The Central Plains constitute the core region of China’s Shehuo culture, where the Lantern Festival celebrations and processional formations are central seasonal activities in northern rural communities (Luo Xiongyan, 2001). Folk lantern dances in the Central Plains originated from agricultural festivals; using lanterns as their central visual symbol, they embody the people’s spiritual aspirations for blessings and good fortune, whilst their formations derive from ancient ritual processions, combining both aesthetic appeal and ceremonial significance. 《The Compendium of Chinese Folk Dance: Henan Volume》 systematically documents the forms of lantern dances across Henan, noting that Central Plains lantern dances generally share three common characteristics: collective processions, narrative prop use, and accompaniment by gongs and drums. Lantern dances in different regions have evolved into distinct forms based on local folk customs, providing a macro-level context for comparative studies of the Nine Lotus Lanterns (Compilation Group of the 《Compendium of Chinese Folk Dance》, 1993). It is widely accepted in academic circles that village temple fairs and markets in the Central Plains serve as the core vehicles for the fusion and dissemination of folk art, whilst the exchange of local folk customs continuously reshapes the movements, vocal styles and prop designs of various lantern dances.

2. Research on the Regional Folklore of Zhenping and the Origins of the Nine Lotus Lanterns

Located in south-western Henan, Zhenping is a convergence point for the folk customs of the Central Plains and Jingchu regions; the Lantern Festival, clan rituals and folk legends collectively constitute the fertile ground from which the Nine Lotus Lanterns emerged (Wang Yan, 2012). Existing historical records confirm that the Nine Lotus Lanterns were created during the Daoguang reign of the Qing Dynasty by Chen Buze, a local village doctor, based on the legend of ‘the Nine Immortal Maidens Descending to Earth’. The original intention was to reform the harmful practice of gambling in rural areas, and the performance served a dual purpose of entertainment and moral education (Wu Yingrong, 2016). Jin Shuang (2023) has traced the lineage of the Nine Lotus Lanterns, dividing its history into four major phases: inception, dissemination, stage adaptation, and intangible cultural heritage protection, thereby clarifying the evolutionary path from oral transmission within clan communities to diverse forms of social transmission. Existing studies on its origins have clarified the chronology of its development, but have not systematically linked the intrinsic connections between the fusion of folk customs and its artistic forms.

3. Research on the Performance and Innovative Transmission of the Nine Lotus Lanterns

Song Zhaomin (2005) focused on the essence of the Nine Lotus Lanterns dance, analysing basic movements such as shuffling steps, circular steps and formation movements, and pointed out that the slow and composed gait aligns with the rhythm of rural night-time processions; Lin Kangxin (2023) and Jin Shuang (2022) examined contemporary stage adaptations of the Nine Lotus Lanterns, identifying LED lighting, standardised costumes and compacted formations as the primary elements of modernisation. Li Wenjuan et al. (2020) examined the challenges facing transmission through interviews with practitioners, proposing

that schools and cultural tourism initiatives could expand the pathways for transmission. Existing research largely dissects movements, music or transmission issues in isolation, lacking a holistic analytical framework that integrates history, props, performance and folk culture, thereby leaving scope for this study.

Research Methodology

This study constitutes a qualitative case study of folk dance, taking the complete artistic form of the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns as its object of analysis. It employs a comprehensive approach utilising four categories of data collection methods, balancing historical texts with first-hand field data, to fully achieve the research objectives:

1. Literature review: A systematic review of Nanyang local annals, Zhenping intangible cultural heritage archives, compilations of folk dance, relevant journals and academic theses was conducted to collate textual historical materials on Central Plains Shehuo, Zhenping folk customs and the origins of the Nine Lotus Lanterns, thereby establishing a theoretical and historical foundation.

2. Field research: During the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival of 2026, the researcher was stationed in Dachenyang Village, Gaoqiu Town—the birthplace of the Nine Lotus Lanterns—to observe and record the entire performance process.

3. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners: Conduct interviews with practitioners, choreographers and principal performers to collect oral histories regarding choreography, prop-making, formation adaptations and changes over time.

4. On-site video observation method: Filming complete video recordings of the Nine Lotus Lanterns in four contexts—traditional villages, square competitions, professional gala performances and school-based performances—to compare the distinctive characteristics of movements, formations, props and audiovisual presentation across different settings.

Research Results

1. The History of the Zhenping Nine-Lotus Lanterns

The Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns originated during the Daoguang reign of the Qing Dynasty, drawing upon the local folk customs resulting from the fusion of Central Plains and Jingchu traditions. Its development over more than 180 years can be divided into five distinct phases. In the early stages, the village doctor Chen Buze combined the legend of the Nine Immortal Maidens with the Lantern Festival folk performances to create this lantern dance. Initially, performances were restricted to processions organised by the Chen clan, serving primarily to educate the local community and to pray for blessings and good fortune. From the late Qing Dynasty through to the Republic of China period, the dance gradually spread through temple fairs and markets, preserving its original performance form through oral transmission and hands-on instruction between masters and apprentices. Between the 1950s and 1990s, the performance was featured in provincial-level festivals; the cast transitioned to include both male and female performers, whilst the musical accompaniment and formations were refined, marking a shift from a folk ritual to a stage art form. In 2013, it was included in the provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage list; the associated performance

techniques were systematically documented, and its melodies even gave rise to the famous song ‘Weaving a Flower Basket’. Between 2018 and 2025, promotion through cultural tourism and school programmes led to the emergence of various adapted versions of the piece, with its folk functions gradually giving way to cultural display and aesthetic education. Viewed over the course of its development, the Central Plains agricultural lantern custom has continuously absorbed local folk elements from Nanyang, giving rise to this composite form of folk lantern dance.

2. The Costume and Prop System of the Nine Lotus Lanterns

2.1 The Lotus Lantern as the Core Prop

The lotus lantern is the iconic folk prop of the Nine Lotus Lanterns, embodying the Central Plains’ lotus-based culture of prayer for blessings. It is divided into two categories: traditional candle-lit lanterns and modern LED lanterns.

Traditional lanterns feature a bamboo-strip frame covered with white paper and red decorative paper, housing a candle inside. Their design is simple and elegant, and they are lightweight; during night-time processions, the candlelight creates a flowing array of light. The size of the lanterns is suited to being carried by hand during rural processions, serving only the dual purposes of illumination and performance. They lack elaborate decoration and are entirely in keeping with the level of local craftsmanship. With the passage of time, modern Nine-Lotus Lanterns have adopted fabric coverings and built-in rechargeable LED lighting, resulting in enhanced colour saturation. The tiered lotus design adds depth to the stage, yet the core of the lanterns retains the auspicious symbolism of the lotus, continuing the tradition of Central Plains folk culture. The number ‘nine’ is a yang number representing longevity and perfection; the ‘lotus’ symbolises purity and peace; and the ‘lamp’ signifies warding off evil and inviting good fortune. Together, these three elements fully embody the Central Plains people’s seasonal aspirations for blessings.



Figure 1: Nine-Lotus Lantern prop

Source: Song Na (2025)



2.2 Costume and Make-up System

In the early days, male performers cross-dressed as fairies, wearing long, coarse-cloth period gowns. Heavy make-up concealed their masculine features, whilst accessories were simple, consisting of silk flowers; the colour palette was subdued, dominated by moon white and pale pink, in keeping with the rustic aesthetic of rural life. After 1957, the roles were performed by women, and the heavy make-up and costumes were simplified, whilst retaining classical fairy elements such as cloud-style hairpins, floral hair ornaments and flowing ribbons.



Figure 2: Group photograph of representative performers of the Henan Province Intangible Cultural Heritage project ‘Nine Lotus Lanterns’ in 1981
Source: Shen Minhua (2025)



Figure 3: Stage performance of the Nine Lotus Lanterns
Source: Nanyang Spring Festival TV Arts Gala (2026)



3. The Complete Performance Format of Zhenping’s Nine Lotus Lanterns

The standard performance unit for the Nine Lotus Lanterns consists of nine performers, following the four-part narrative of ‘Nine Fairy Maidens Descending to Earth’: Descent to Earth—Viewing the Lanterns—Exchanging Lantern Greetings—Reluctance to Leave the Mortal World. It integrates dance, singing in the local dialect and formation movements, combining the dual characteristics of a collective ritual and a narrative performance.

3.1 Dance Formations

The core steps consist of circular movements, small shuffles and advancing, retreating and circling steps. The movements are gentle and restrained, with no high-difficulty jumps, reflecting the unhurried demeanour of Central Plains agricultural life; hand movements include raising, rotating and swaying the lanterns, with the performers and lanterns becoming one. All movements revolve around the lotus lanterns, distinguishing this art form from other folk dances without props.

In terms of traditional formations, the performance preserves dozens of classic Central Plains Shehuo formations, with the circular formation, the ‘pin’ character formation, the criss-cross formation and the ‘blooming lotus’ formation serving as the foundation. Traditional village processions follow lengthy routes, with formations exhibiting a strong sense of fluidity and capable of forming the auspicious characters for ‘Peace Under Heaven’. In the stage adaptation, the lengthy processional routes have been shortened, whilst a significant number of stationary, symmetrical formations have been added to suit a single-directional audience and camera filming.



Figure 4: Live performance of the Nine Lotus Lantern
Source: Shen Minhua (2025)



3.2 Performance Venues

Performance venues can be categorised into four types. 1. Performances in traditional villages. Performed in open spaces such as the streets and alleys of traditional villages or on threshing floors during the Lantern Festival night; spectators are free to follow the procession, with no distinction between ‘on stage’ and ‘off stage’; there is no time limit on the performance, and all formation movements and dialect lyrics are fully retained, with the blessing ceremony performed in its entirety; 2. Public Square Performances. Organised centrally by cultural centres, with the duration condensed to within 6 minutes; lengthy procession segments are omitted, and the precision of the formations serves as the core criterion for evaluation; 3. Cultural Tourism/Television Stages. Equipped with professional lighting and large screens, with costumes and lighting fully enhanced; the narrative is simplified, retaining only the highlight segment featuring the lotus formation, serving as a showcase of regional culture; 4. Campus performances. Movements are significantly simplified, with simple, symmetrical formations; accompanied by explanatory folk culture lessons, the focus is on the dissemination of aesthetic education through intangible cultural heritage.

3.3 Lyric Content

The narrative of the vocal style centres on Nanyang’s indigenous ‘Lantern Songs’, divided into fast and slow ‘Duihualan’ melodies. The lyrics revolve around farming, prayers for blessings and neighbourly harmony, whilst the performance in the local dialect is imbued with the rustic charm of the Central Plains; the melody of the well-known folk song ‘Weaving a Flower Basket’ originates from the Nine-Lotus Lantern, serving as a key vehicle for the dissemination of its musical culture to the wider world.



结束

on **10th** August 2026, online via Zoom

Contemporary efforts in the protection of intangible cultural heritage, the integration of culture and tourism, and the promotion of aesthetic education in schools have prompted the Nine Lotus Lanterns to gradually move beyond their original rural folk context, shifting towards public spaces such as square competitions, professional stages and school classrooms. To adapt to modern performance conventions, the Nine Lotus Lanterns has undergone systematic innovation and adaptation in terms of props, costumes, formations and music; standardised LED lighting, structured stage designs and pre-recorded accompaniment have replaced traditional handmade props, fluid processional formations and improvised rural musical performances.

The living transmission of the Nine Lotus Lamps demonstrates that modern innovations in folk lantern dances cannot be detached from their rural cultural roots. To ensure long-term transmission, a dual-track development system must be established, distinguishing between the complete, authentic folk version practised in villages and the abridged version presented in public performances, whilst balancing the preservation of the folklore’s original form with contemporary innovative dissemination. Whilst adapting to modern aesthetic and arts education needs, the cultural essence of Central Plains folklore and the distinctive characteristics of local art must be safeguarded, thereby achieving the sustainable, living transmission of the cultural and artistic value of the Zhenping Nine Lotus Lanterns.

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