

From Embodied Ethnic Knowledge to Contemporary Choreography: A Case Study of Ma Wenjing's Jinuo Drum

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Abstract

The transformation of ethnic dance from traditional cultural contexts to contemporary stages raises questions about how embodied cultural knowledge can be preserved and creatively reinterpreted. This study examines Ma Wenjing's *Jinuo Drum* to identify Jinuo embodied ethnic knowledge, analyze its transformation into contemporary choreographic language, and develop an analytical framework for this process. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were drawn from documentary materials, performance recordings, and semi-structured interviews and analyzed through thematic, dance-text, choreographic, and ethnographic interpretation. The findings identify five dimensions of embodied ethnic knowledge—bodily, ritual, cultural memory, ecological, and aesthetic knowledge—and four stages of choreographic transformation: retention, extraction, reconstruction, and aesthetic reconfiguration. The study proposes an **Embodied Ethnic Knowledge–Choreographic Transformation** framework, contributing an analytical perspective for understanding ethnic dance creation and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Embodied Ethnic Knowledge, Choreographic Transformation, Jinuo Drum

Introduction

With the development of globalization, modernization, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding, ethnic dances have gradually moved from traditional ritual spaces into new contexts such as theatres, education, cultural communication, and cultural industries. However, during the processes of staging, professionalization, and commercialization, ethnic dances face challenges including the weakening of embodied experience, the loss of cultural contexts, and tensions between tradition and innovation. Therefore, exploring the creative transformation of Yunnan's ethnic cultural resources has become an important topic in contemporary ethnic dance studies.

Ma Wenjing, awarded the title of “Dance Artist with Outstanding Contribution to Chinese Dance Art” by the Chinese Dancers Association (Xinhua News, 2026), has devoted more than 70 years to ethnic dance creation, education, and cultural transmission in Yunnan's ethnic regions. Her work *Jinuo Drum* was presented from June 12–19, 2009, at the Special Performance of Traditional Music and Dance of Chinese Ethnic Minorities as part of the Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition held at the Tianqiao Theatre in Beijing. Subsequently, *Jinuo Drum* was selected for three consecutive years as an outstanding work in the exhibition organized by the Ministry of Culture (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, 2009), making it a significant case for examining the transformation of ethnic cultural resources into contemporary choreography.



Previous studies have primarily focused on three areas. First, research has examined the transmission of ethnic dance and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. For example, Yang Deyun (2015) investigated the cognition, protection, transmission, and development of ethnic and folk dances in Yunnan. Second, scholars have explored Ma Wenjing's choreographic practice and dance education. Zhang Lin (2010), for instance, analyzed Ma Wenjing's development of Dai dance teaching materials and her pedagogical approach to Dai folk dance. Third, studies have addressed Yunnan ethnic dance in relation to regional culture. Tang Baijing (2017), for example, provided a comprehensive review of representative ethnic dance theatre productions in Yunnan during the new era.

However, relatively little attention has been paid to how embodied ethnic knowledge is incorporated into the choreographic process and how such knowledge is transformed through embodied practice into contemporary stage language. This study seeks to address this gap by examining Jinuo Drum as a case study, with particular attention to the ways in which culturally embedded bodily knowledge is retained, extracted, reconstructed, and aesthetically reconfigured in the process of choreographic transformation.

Research Objectives

This study focuses on three objectives:

1. To explore the embodied ethnic knowledge embedded in the traditional cultural practices of the Jinuo people.
2. To examine how Ma Wenjing transforms embodied ethnic knowledge into contemporary choreographic language in Jinuo Drum.
3. To develop an analytical framework for understanding the transformation of embodied ethnic knowledge into contemporary choreographic language in Jinuo Drum.

Scope of the Research

This study focuses on Ma Wenjing's *Jinuo Drum* as its primary case, examining the development of the work from her field engagement with Jinuo cultural practices in 2006 to its stage presentation in 2009. The analysis draws on performance recordings, historical and documentary materials, interview data, and relevant information concerning Jinuo cultural practices and representative inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. These materials are used specifically to examine how cultural and bodily knowledge encountered during the creative process was transformed into the choreographic and stage language of *Jinuo Drum*.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design, with Ma Wenjing's Jinuo Drum as the primary case. Data were drawn from documentary materials, performance recordings, and semi-structured interviews with three participants, including choreographer Ma Wenjing and two principal performers. Participants were purposively selected based on their key creative roles and direct involvement in the creation and performance of the work.

The study proceeded in four stages: (1) reviewing relevant literature and documentary materials; (2) analyzing interview and audiovisual data; (3) conducting dance-text and choreographic analyses of Jinuo Drum; and (4) synthesizing the findings to develop a preliminary analytical framework. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, dance-text analysis, choreographic analysis, and ethnographically informed interpretation, with particular attention to how embodied ethnic knowledge was translated into contemporary choreographic language, including movement vocabulary, rhythm, spatial organization, ritual elements, and



the use of the drum. Data-source triangulation was employed to cross-check interpretations across documentary, audiovisual, and interview materials, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Research Results

Finding 1. The Composition of Jinuo Embodied Ethnic Knowledge

During the creative period from 2006 to 2009, Ma Wenjing visited inheritors of Jinuo intangible cultural heritage, observed the daily lives of villagers in Jinuo Mountain, visited local museums, watched local performances, and learned about their customs and traditions.

In an interview conducted on July 23, 2026, Ma Wenjing explained:

On May 2, 2006, I arrived in Jinuo Mountain, Jinghong City, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, and visited Sha Che, a folk artist at the time, along with a group of other folk artists. We climbed Jinuo Mountain and saw a carved female figure. This was the Jinuo people’s creator goddess, Amo Yaobai.

According to Yu (2000), the Jinuo creator goddess, Amo Yaobai, created the heavens and the earth, giving rise to the brother and sister Mahei and Manü, after which plants, animals, and all other living things came into existence. In order to recreate the world, the goddess decided to submerge all living things in a great flood. To preserve humankind, she placed the brother and sister inside a large drum. After the floodwaters receded, Mahei and Manü became the ancestors of the Jinuo people (Du, 2009).

The Jinuo Big Drum Dance embodies a comprehensive system of embodied ethnic knowledge. Such knowledge is “inscribed” on the body and constitutes a condition for the continuity of cultural life (Csordas, 1994). This knowledge has developed through long-term practices of labor, ritual, festivals, and everyday life and is continuously transmitted and renewed through embodied practices, collectively constituting a fundamental basis of Jinuo culture. The study found that Jinuo embodied ethnic knowledge can be primarily understood through five dimensions: bodily knowledge, ritual knowledge, cultural memory knowledge, ecological knowledge, and aesthetic knowledge.

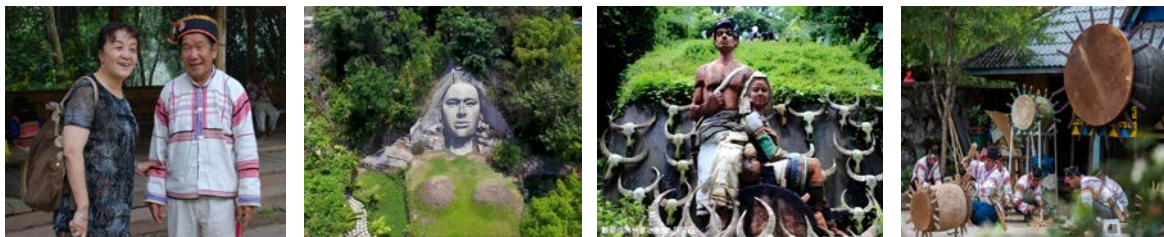


Figure notes (from left to right) 1: Ma Wenjing with Sha Che, a Jinuo folk artist. 2: Amoyao Bai, the legendary creator goddess of the Jinuo people. 3: Mahei and Maniu, the legendary ancestors of the Jinuo people. 4: Jinuo folk artists making a Jinuo drum.



Stage	Choreographic Transformation
Retention: Preserving Core Cultural Spirit and Symbolic Meaning	Preserves solar symbolism, collective drumming, ritual rhythms, and embodied power. Movements such as lowered body gravity, foot stamping, and drumstick movements maintain the cultural meaning of communication between humans and deities and reverence for life.
Extraction: Extracting Bodily Vocabulary	Extracts movement experiences from hunting, labor, and festival rituals, including hunting gestures, stepping, rotation, and arm extensions, transforming lived experiences into stage vocabulary.
Reconstruction: Reorganizing Movement, Rhythm, and Spatial Structure	(1) Duration: Transforms the original 46-minute ritual dance into a 10-minute stage performance. (2) Music: Incorporates He Guiying’s female solo, male–female duet, and collective chorus, creating an unaccompanied polyphonic structure. (3) Rhythm: Strengthens contrasts of intensity and dynamics, enhancing visual and auditory flow.
Aesthetic Reconfiguration Transforming Ethnic Symbols into Contemporary Stage Language	(1) Drum Arrangement: Adds two smaller drums on both sides of the central large drum, reinforcing the symbolic meaning of solar worship. (2) Character Construction: Creates He Guiying’s sacred “goddess image” through integrated design of lighting, space, sound, and bodily expression. (3) Virtuosoic Techniques: Incorporates diverse drumming techniques, including front, side, and back positions; standing and kneeling levels; and leg movements, jumps, and spins. (4) Segmental Reorganization: Integrates the Jino hunting song to create a celebratory atmosphere resembling a heroic homecoming. (5) Intensification and Exaggeration: Develops repeated rhythmic patterns, gradually increasing emotional intensity with accelerating drumbeats.



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

In conclusion, by enhancing drum intensity, rhythmic variations, collective formations, and stage composition, Ma Wenjing transformed traditional Jino Grand Drum culture into a dance work with contemporary aesthetic appeal. Performance is not merely a repetition of the past; rather, it is a form of embodied behavior that is selected, reorganized, and transmitted through new performative contexts (Schechner, 2013). The drum is no longer merely a ritual instrument but becomes an important symbol connecting ethnic memory, embodied power, and stage expression, achieving the creative transformation of ethnic cultural resources.

Finding 3. Analytical Framework of Embodied Ethnic Knowledge–Choreographic Transformation

Based on the above findings, this study proposes the concept of “Embodied Ethnic Knowledge–Choreographic Transformation.” This concept suggests that ethnic cultural resources originate from bodily practices, are understood through ethnographic fieldwork, and are transformed from traditional embodied knowledge into contemporary stage expressions through choreographic strategies, including retention, extraction, reconstruction, and aesthetic reconfiguration. As Kaeppler (2000) points out, dance is not an independent performance form but a cultural practice embedded within a complete way of life.

Therefore, based on the analysis of embodied ethnic knowledge and fieldwork-based choreographic transformation, this study constructs the “Embodied Ethnic Knowledge–Choreographic Transformation” analytical framework, providing a new perspective for ethnic dance research, choreographic practice, and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This study applies Csordas’s Embodiment Theory and argues that the body is not only a form of cultural expression but also an important site for the generation and transmission of ethnic knowledge. The bodily movements in Jinuo Drum carry ethnic history, beliefs, ecological experiences, and social relationships. Combined with Schechner’s Performance Theory, this study further demonstrates that ethnic dance is not a simple reproduction of tradition, but a process of creating new stage expressions through recontextualization and creative transformation.

Discussion

1. It supports Csordas’s Embodiment Theory by demonstrating that ethnic bodily movements carry historical, religious, and cultural knowledge, serving as important mediums for transmitting ethnic experiences.
2. It extends Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s theory of heritagization by showing that choreographic practice is also an important process of cultural heritage reproduction.
3. By connecting with Schechner’s Performance Theory, this study argues that ethnic dance is not merely a replication of tradition but a new cultural expression formed through ethnographic understanding, movement transformation, and stage reconstruction. It further proposes the analytical framework of “Embodied Ethnic Knowledge–Choreographic Transformation–Cultural Circulation Mechanism.”

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