

Academic Article

Exploring Jiarong Tibetan's Diverse Religious Culture through the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Buzha Drama

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Abstract

The Buzha drama of the Garzê Tibetan people is a unique “ritual dance” performed periodically in various religious settings. This form of performance, which falls between theater and dance, reflects the diverse cultural and belief systems of the local people and has been listed as an intangible cultural heritage for protection in recent years. Tribal organizations integrate various religious and cultural forms, including folk beliefs, Bon, Tibetan Buddhism, local customs, and regional knowledge into folk song and dance, transforming them into psychological customs and ethnic emotions, penetrating cultural elements. This article takes an anthropological perspective and examines the relationship between the artistic representation of the Buzha drama and the region's life, spiritual beliefs, and ethnic identity through prop making, ritual procedures, and dance content. The article also explores the characteristics and values of the diverse religious culture of the Garzê Tibetan people.

Keywords: Jiarong Tibetan, Buzha Drama, Religious Culture, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Identity

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Introduction

The Jiarong Tibetan people are a minority ethnic group in the northwest region of China, with their unique religious beliefs and cultural traditions serving as their distinctive cultural identity (Xu, 2022). The Jiarong Tibetans reside in areas, such as Maqin County and Tongren County in Qinghai Province, as well as Datong Hui and Tu Autonomous County and Chengxi District of Xining City, and are one of the most representative branches of the Tibetan ethnic group (Tu et al., 2005). The Jiarong Tibetans' religious beliefs mainly include various religions such as Tibetan Buddhism, Tusi religion, and Shamanism, which have played an important role in the formation and development of Jiarong Tibetan culture.

In the religious and cultural heritage of Jiarong Tibetans, intangible cultural heritage is an important component, and the unique performance art form of Buzha drama is considered a significant manifestation of Jiarong Tibetan religious beliefs and cultural identity (Bo, 2020). Buzha drama originated from the Shamanism beliefs of Jiarong Tibetans, and after continuous evolution and inheritance, it became a comprehensive performance art form that incorporates various religious beliefs and cultural elements (Kolas, 2005). In Buzha drama performances, the characters, costumes, props, music, and other aspects all embody the uniqueness of Jiarong Tibetan religious beliefs and cultural traditions, becoming one of the representatives of Jiarong Tibetan intangible cultural heritage.

However, with the changes in society and the evolution of culture, the inheritance and protection of Buzha drama are facing severe challenges. The rapid development of modern society and the influence of globalization have led to profound changes in traditional culture, and the intangible cultural heritage of Jiarong Tibetans also faces serious threats. In order to protect and inherit Jiarong Tibetan religious culture and intangible cultural heritage, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on the multiple religious and cultural expressions of Buzha drama, the relationship between religious beliefs and the cultural identity of Jiarong Tibetans, and the importance of protecting intangible cultural heritage.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the diversity and complexity of Jiarong Tibetan religious culture, analyzing the impact of religious beliefs on Jiarong Tibetan cultural identity, and the necessity of protecting intangible cultural heritage through the study of Buzha drama as a part of Jiarong Tibetan intangible cultural heritage.

History of Jiarong Tibetans

The Jiarong Tibetans reside in certain areas of Danba and Kangding in Ganzi Prefecture, as well as Jinchuan, Xiaojin, Maerkang, Li County, Heishui, Hongyuan, and parts of Wenchuan in Aba Prefecture, and Ya'an City and Liangshan Prefecture, among other places. They speak the Jiarong language and are primarily engaged in agricultural production. In the Tibetan region, the local Tibetans in this area are called "Rongba" (rural people) (Li & Zhang, 2019). (Figure 1).

Until 1954, the Jiarong people were considered an independent ethnic group. From the early years of the Republic of China until 1953, the literature referred to the ethnic group in the Jiarong region as the "Jiarong ethnic group." In the early 1950s, the Central Institute of Nationalities even had a "Jiarong Ethnic Group Research Class" and developed the Jiarong phonetic script to document local folk stories. During the first National People's Congress after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the ethnic identification of various ethnic groups across the country took place. In 1954, during the first session of the National People's Congress, it was announced that the "Jiarong ethnic group" would be recognized as part of the Tibetan ethnic group. Since then, for convenience, they have been referred to as the "Jiarong Tibetans" (Li, 2010).



Figure 1 Real-life image of the Suomo Riverbank in Barkam
Source: Travel Guide, 2023

Historical Records

According to historical records in Chinese literature, the southeastern river valleys of the present-day state were inhabited and actively occupied by various ethnic groups in ancient times. These groups were known as the "Jialiang Yi (Jiáliáng)," "Bai Gou Qiang," "Gelin Ren," "Geji Ren," and others. They were the indigenous ancestors of the region. During the Tang Dynasty, they assimilated with the Tubo immigrants and garrisons, eventually becoming part of the Tibetan ethnic group (Su, 2017).

Before the liberation era, local officials in the Jiarong region often claimed that their ancestors originated from Tibet. This claim is supported by the genealogical records of prominent figures in the area. For instance, the Wasi tusi in Wenchuan County, the Chuosijia tusi in Jinchuan County, and the Muping tusi in Baoxing County in the Ya'an area have documented genealogical records tracing their origins back to Tibet. These records highlight the ancestral connections between the local ruling families and Tibet (Zeng, 2021).

Furthermore, the Zagu tusi and the Suomo tusi systems have their roots in the Tang Dynasty Tubo general Sitang Mou, who played a significant role in the region, and his descendants went on to establish the Zagu and Suomo tusi systems. These tusi systems were a form of local governance under the imperial administration, where local leaders held power and authority over their respective territories (Zeng, 2017).

The integration of the indigenous ethnic groups with the Tubo immigrants and garrisons led to the formation of the Tibetan ethnic group in the region. This merging of cultures, traditions, and lineages shaped the unique identity of the Jiarong Tibetans. They inherited aspects of both their indigenous ancestry and the Tibetan cultural influences (Peng & Chen, 2018).

The historical connections between the Jiarong Tibetans and Tibet can be traced back to ancient times. The migration, assimilation, and intermingling of different ethnic groups have contributed to the rich and diverse heritage of the Jiarong region. It is through understanding and appreciating these historical roots that we can gain insights into the fascinating past and present of the Jiarong Tibetan people. (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Real-life image of the official residence of the Zuokeyi tusi
Source: Travel Guide, 2023

According to the "Political and Religious History of Ando," it states, "The majority of the population in the northern and southern regions of Doma are descendants of the Tibetan Dharma King (referring to Songtsen Gampo) who settled the descendants of the garrison stationed on the Tang-Tubo border...". In the 5th and 6th centuries AD, there were very few people in the Jiarong region, and it was a period when warlords, such as the leader Tsobha, held power. In the early 7th century, the Tibetan Emperor Songtsen Gampo unified Tibet, and the Jiarong region was also incorporated into Tibet. The local leaders in Jiarong were appointed by the Tibetan Emperor's generals. In the book "Political and Religious History of Ando" and among the Tibetan people who speak the Ando dialect, the Jiarong region is referred to as "Chake." The reason is that in history, the Tibetan Emperor sent his minister Kepan to the Jiarong region to serve as a leader and military commander. His official residence was north of Songgang, and in royal decrees and official documents, the Tibetan royal family referred to him as "Jiamucha Weng Kepan" or "Chawarong Kepan," abbreviated as "Chake." Kepan recruited a large number of soldiers from the Zha tribe, one of the four major families in Tibet, and he was in charge of the "Eight Kingdoms of the Western Mountains" during the Tang Dynasty Tubo era (Sai, 2017).

Historical Development

In ancient times, the ethnic groups referred to as "Qiang, Shi, and Yi" were known as "Jialiang Yi," "Bai Gou Qiang," "Gelin Ren," "Geji Ren," and others. They were actually indigenous inhabitants who were scattered throughout the mountains and rivers. During the reign of the 9th generation Tibetan Emperor, Songtsen Gampo, specifically during the Eastern Han Dynasty, around 126 AD, the earliest form of Buddhism in the Tibetan region, called Yongzhong Bon religion, was introduced into the state's territory. It gradually flourished, and the influence of Tibetan culture on the ancient ancestors of the Jiarong Tibetan people began during the Eastern Han Dynasty. Indian Buddhism, on the other hand, only began to develop within the state during the reign of King Trisong Detsen. Due to the long-term influence of Tibetan culture centered around religion and spirituality, Indian Buddhism (originally Yongzhong Bon religion) gradually became the belief system of the aforementioned ethnic groups as a whole. Along with extensive Tibetan migration, military occupation, and rule, after more than a thousand years of integration, assimilation, and prolonged interactions with the Tibetan people, the unified Jiarong Tibetan ethnicity we see today was formed (Ye, & Si, 2021).

Folklore - Legend of White Stone Worship

In Jiarong Tibetan culture, each corner of the roof is adorned with a white stone, which is considered their divine spirit. During sowing, harvesting, and ancestral festivals, the Jiarong Tibetans perform rituals and offerings to the white stone. On the mountain-facing side of the roof's platform, there is a tripod-like structure made of white stones with ceramic jars placed on top. Whenever there are important matters within the family, they use these ceramic jars for blessings (Yi et al., 2018).

Regarding the worship of the white stone, the legend is in ancient times, during migration, the Qiang people and Jiarong Tibetans encountered a tribe of strong and courageous Geji people. The Tibetans and Qiang people suffered repeated defeats in battles against the Geji tribe and were forced to prepare to abandon their lands and migrate far away. At this critical moment, a leader among the Qiang people received a divine revelation in a dream, instructing all Tibetans and Qiang people to tie wool around their necks as a symbol and to use hard white cloud stones and wooden sticks as weapons. Finally, they defeated the Geji tribe, and the Tibetans and Qiang people were able to settle down and live in peace. To show gratitude for this divine favor, since then, the Jiarong Tibetans and Qiang people have revered white cloud stones as the highest heavenly deities. This tradition has been passed down through generations until today (He, 2017).

Legend of Jiarong Tibetan Chieftains

Legend One: In ancient times, there were people living in the world, but there were no chieftains. One day, a rainbow descended from the sky and landed in the area of O'ermaolongren. From within the rainbow, a star emerged and directly shone upon Jiarong. In that place, there was a fairy named Kamuru Mi who became pregnant through the starlight. She later gave birth to three eggs: one flower-colored, one white, and one yellow. The three eggs flew to the top of Qiongbu Mountain (referring to the present-day Qiongbu region in Tibet), and each hatched into a child. The eldest, born from the flower-colored egg, traveled east and became the Chosgar King. The other two eggs, one white and one yellow, gave birth to two children who became the Upper and Lower Chieftains of Qiongbu. The Chosgar King had three sons: Chograk, who became the Chosgar Chieftain; Ri Wangja, who assumed the role of Chieftain; and Aixu Wangja, who became the Geshizha Chieftain.

Legend Two: The origin myth of Wasi Chieftain is similar to Chosgar. It goes as follows: The Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in heaven transformed into a great bird called "Qiong" with golden wings and landed in Qiongbu of Usang. It had two horns on its head, emitting light from its forehead. The radiance from its forehead and its gaze were so intense that no one dared to approach. Once the Qiong bird flew away, people approached and found three remaining eggs: one white, one yellow, and one black. They placed the eggs in a temple, recited scriptures, and offered worship. The three eggs hatched into three children nurtured on the mountains. When the children grew up, the child from the yellow egg became the Chieftain of Dandong and Badi, the child from the black egg became the Chosgar Chieftain, and the child from the white egg became the Wasi Chieftain. According to the legend, the ancestors of many Jiarong's eighteen chieftains were said to have come from Qiongbu in Tibet. It is said that the location was about an eighteen-day journey northwest of Lhasa. The region was said to have thirty-nine ancient tribes with a large population. Due to the barren land, many people migrated to northern Kang and northwest Sichuan. They gradually multiplied and occupied the vast Jiarong region and even more areas. According to the comprehensive survey of place names, there are numerous place names related to Qiongbu in the Tibetan regions of Ganzi and Aba in Sichuan Province. Especially in terms of mountains, many are named "Qiongri" (a homophone of Qiong), "Qionglong," "Qiongxin," and so on. Investigations have shown that they are all related to the historical migrations of ethnic groups. The three eggs, whether black or flower-colored, white, and yellow, could possibly refer to the original three tribes related by blood or geography.

Body

Development History of Buzha Drama

Buzha drama is a type of Tibetan Buddhist ritual dance performed in "prayer ceremonies" held by Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. It is known as the "Vajra Exorcism Dance" and has its origins dating back to the 8th century when Guru Rinpoche used this dance to subdue evil spirits during the construction of the Samye Monastery in Tibet. The great Indian translator, Vairocana, brought the dance to the region of Kham

in Tibet. Dozens of holy sites where Vairocana is practiced can still be found in the Dawu Village (Sunshine over Tibet, 2018).

Buzha drama is a form of Tibetan Buddhist ritual dance that combines mythology, music, dance, performance, chanting, and singing. The sounds of the musical instruments are clear, and the rhythms are dynamic, slow and fast, with an impressive climax. The players of cymbals and drums, often monks, control the rhythm and pace of the entire performance, making them a critical part of the show. The rich symphony includes the sonorous and majestic mangtong, the joyful and bright suona, and the deep and profound conch. The performance usually lasts for more than three hours, and some elders recall that a complete performance requires an entire day (Sunshine over Tibet, 2018).

In the Dawu Village, Buzha drama has preserved the traditional religious elements of "Qiangmu," such as the dance movements, hand gestures, ritual offerings, mask making, musical instrument playing, and the participation of lama masters. At the same time, due to its unique historical process, major events such as the Qing Dynasty's pacification of the Xiaojin and Dajin Rivers, and the addition of knife and spear dances have made Buzha drama more entertaining and performance-oriented as a folk art (Sunshine over Tibet, 2018).

The Diverse Religious and Cultural Expressions in Buzha Drama

Buzha drama is one of the traditional religious and cultural activities of the Garze Tibetan people, which is a performance art that integrates elements such as singing, dancing, and drama. It is based on the history, legends, and religious culture of the Garze Tibetan people, demonstrating their understanding and pursuit of nature, life, faith, and other aspects (Bo, 2020). Through analyzing various aspects of Buzha drama, such as character images, costumes, props, music, and others, it can be seen that it incorporates various religious beliefs and cultural elements, such as Tibetan Buddhism, chieftain religions, shamanism, showcasing the diversity and complexity of the Garze Tibetan religious culture. (Figure 3).

The character images in Buzha drama also reflect the diverse religious and cultural traditions of the Garze Tibetan people (Danzeng, 2011). For instance, the main characters in Buzha drama can be classified into benevolent gods, demons, and ordinary people. The benevolent gods represent the guardian deities in Tibetan Buddhism and local chieftain religions, with the functions of protecting people and maintaining social order. The demons, on the other hand, represent evil forces and are opposed to the benevolent gods, requiring people to expel and eliminate them. Ordinary people are the carriers and participants of the entire storyline, acting as a bridge of communication between the audience and the culture of Buzha drama. (Figure 4).

Furthermore, the costumes, props, music, and other aspects of Buzha drama also incorporate a variety of religious and cultural elements. The costumes in Buzha drama often use bright colors and gorgeous patterns, reflecting both the traditional clothing culture of the Garze Tibetan people and incorporating elements of Tibetan Buddhism and chieftain religions. For example, Buzha drama often features the robes of Tibetan Buddhist monks and the auspicious animal patterns of local chieftain religions. In terms of props, the musical instruments used in Buzha drama include the lute, hand drum, waist drum, and trumpet, integrating musical elements from Tibetan Buddhism and chieftain religions, making the entire performance more diverse and complex. (Figure 5).

In summary, Buzha drama is an important representative of the diverse religious and cultural expressions in the intangible cultural heritage of the Garze Tibetan people. Analyzing its character images, costumes, props, music, and other aspects, we can see that it incorporates various religious beliefs and cultural elements, such as Tibetan Buddhism, chieftain religions, and shamanism, showcasing the diversity and complexity of the Garze Tibetan religious culture.



Figure 3 Buzha Drama
Source: Aba Prefecture Local Chronicles Office, 2020



Figure 4 Buzha Drama
Source: Aba Prefecture Local Chronicles Office, 2020



Figure 5 Buzha Drama
Source: Aba Prefecture Local Chronicles Office, 2020

The Relationship between Religious Beliefs and Cultural Identity

Religious beliefs play an important role in cultural identity (Pedersen, 2014). In the cultural identity of the Garzê Tibetan people, Tibetan Buddhism, the chieftain system, and folk beliefs of the Tibetan people all play crucial roles, interweaving and influencing each other, creating the characteristics of the diverse religious culture of the Garzê Tibetan people. In the performance of the Buzha drama, these different religious beliefs and cultural identities are also expressed, enriching the cultural identity of the Garzê Tibetan people.

The Garzê Tibetan people are a branch of the Tibetan people in southwestern China, with a long history and unique cultural traditions. Religious beliefs are an important component of their culture. The Garzê Tibetan people believe in various religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, shamanism, and local gods, among others. The Buzha drama, as a folk religious and cultural activity, holds an important position in Garzê Tibetan society. It is a traditional sacrificial ceremony held in the lunar calendar in June or July, with the purpose of praying for a good harvest, celebrating the harvest, and asking for the blessing of ancestors. Through the sacrificial ceremony of the Buzha drama, the Garzê Tibetan people express their respect and recognition of their religious beliefs and cultural traditions through prayer, singing, dancing, and other means.

By analyzing the relationship between religious beliefs and cultural identity in the Buzha drama, we can understand the important influence of religious beliefs on the cultural identity of the Garzê Tibetan people (Xu, 2022). Firstly, the Garzê Tibetan people's emphasis and reverence for religious beliefs have integrated these beliefs into their daily lives and cultural traditions, creating a unique cultural style and tradition. Secondly, religious beliefs play a crucial role in folk religious and cultural activities such as the Buzha drama, which serves not only as a way for the Garzê Tibetan people to express their religious beliefs and cultural identity but also as an important means for them to inherit and promote the Garzê Tibetan culture.

In modern society, with the development and changes in economics, technology, culture, and other aspects, the cultural identity of the Garzê Tibetan people is facing new challenges and pressures. On the one hand, the influence of modernization has gradually reduced some traditional, religious, and cultural activities, and some younger generations have also started to accept modern thoughts and lifestyles, reducing their interest in and recognition of traditional culture. On the other hand, the development of tourism and the diversification of society have also brought new opportunities and challenges to the cultural inheritance of the Garzê Tibetan people.

The Importance of Protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage is an essential part of a nation's culture, playing a crucial role in maintaining the integrity and diversity of that culture. As a representative of the intangible cultural heritage of the Jiarong Tibetan people, the Buzha drama (a type of traditional Tibetan opera) is not only a way of cultural inheritance and continuity but also an important carrier of Jiarong Tibetan culture. However, with social changes and cultural evolution, the transmission and protection of Buzha drama face severe challenges. Therefore, protecting intangible cultural heritage is essential to maintaining the integrity and diversity of Jiarong Tibetan multi-religious culture.

With rapid urbanization and economic development, traditional ways of production and living are disappearing, making traditional cultures and intangible cultural heritage increasingly fragile. Additionally, the impact of foreign cultures and the rise of modern entertainment have also brought pressure to the cultural inheritance of Jiarong Tibetan people. These factors have led to the loss of cultural heritage and cultural identity. The intangible cultural heritage of Jiarong Tibetan people is the core of their cultural identity and their unique cultural heritage. As one of the essential intangible cultural heritages of Jiarong Tibetan people, Buzha drama represents the rich religious beliefs and cultural traditions of this ethnic group. Protecting and inheriting intangible cultural heritage such as Buzha drama can not only promote the inheritance and development of Jiarong Tibetan culture but also deepen people's understanding and recognition of multi-religious culture.

In conclusion, this article explores the influence of religious culture on the cultural identity of Jiarong Tibetan people from the perspective of Buzha drama and the multi-religious culture reflected in it, further elaborating the necessity of protecting Jiarong Tibetan intangible cultural heritage. Through this research and exploration, we can better understand and inherit Jiarong Tibetan religious culture and intangible cultural heritage, promoting its cultural inheritance and development.

Discussion

Although ethnic identity naturally tends to be exclusive, the diversity and richness of expression found in the mixed forms of song and dance in the Jiarong Tibetan culture demonstrate the possibility of constructing multiple identities in the era of globalization (Juergensmeyer, 2019). In the context of unprecedented expansion of interactive space among nations in the modern era of globalization, constructing multiple cultural identities becomes necessary and feasible. Through benign interaction, identities tend to merge, resulting in a "unity in diversity" pattern that represents the identity of small ethnic groups, major ethnic groups, and overall "national citizenship". This viewpoint aligns with international research on the fluidity and hybridity of identities in multicultural contexts (Flew, 2020). The concept of "unity in diversity" mentioned in the discussion reflects a common theme in global discussions on managing internal diversity within nations and fostering inclusive citizenship (Gleason, 2019).

In this context, observing the specific characteristics of folk art in a particular region and studying the evolution, reproduction, and consumption patterns of folk culture conform to the logic of contemporary national construction and the modern context. The effectiveness of this approach as a way of protecting and utilizing ethnic culture in a fusion context truly depends on the "villagers" themselves, the holders of religious and cultural beliefs, and their ability to stimulate innovation and creativity within the cultural environment.

As a legally recognized intangible cultural heritage, the preservation and inheritance of Buza drama allows for diversity in form and content that caters to the multiple needs of different groups and promotes religious and cultural diversity in the Jiarong Tibetan region in terms of artistic expression, psychological well-being, and social customs (Liu & Li, 2020). The observation and study of specific characteristics of folk art, as well as the evolution and consumption patterns of folk culture, resonate with international research on the significance of cultural heritage for cultural diversity and community well-being (Kim et al., 2021). Scholars worldwide emphasize the importance of understanding local cultural practices and their adaptation to modern contexts while considering the agency of the community itself. The fusion of religious elements and features, such as the commemorative significance of the sword and gun dance in the Buza drama holds strong reference value for the study of Jiarong Tibetan beliefs and the historical and scholarly research on the interaction process between Bon and Tibetan Buddhism from conflict to fusion.

Suggestion

How to strengthen the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage such as Buzha drama is a crucial issue. Firstly, the government and society should increase investment in the protection and inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of the Gyarong Tibetan people. The government can encourage social participation by formulating relevant laws and policies and providing necessary funding and technical support. The society can enhance public awareness and understanding of Gyarong Tibetan cultural heritage through cultural activities, exhibitions, and educational promotion, and at the same time, promote the inheritance and development of cultural heritage.

In addition, with the rapid development of the tourism industry, intangible cultural heritage such as Buzha drama has become an important resource for attracting tourists. However, some commercial tourism activities and cultural performances often sacrifice traditional culture, posing greater challenges to the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, it is also necessary to strengthen the supervision and regulation of commercial cultural activities to protect the intangible cultural heritage of the Gyarong Tibetan people.

Conclusion

Through analyzing the non-material cultural heritage of Buzha drama in the Jiarong Tibetan region, this article explores the influence of religious beliefs on cultural identity and the embodiment of diverse religious cultures in Buzha drama. The article also emphasizes the necessity of protecting non-material cultural heritage and the need to integrate traditional culture with modern society in the process of protection and inheritance.

As a representative of Jiarong Tibetan non-material cultural heritage, Buzha drama reflects the diversity and complexity of Jiarong Tibetan religious culture. By analyzing the character images, costumes, props, music, and other aspects of Buzha drama, we can see the fusion of various religious beliefs and cultural elements such as Tibetan Buddhism, Tusi religion, and shamanism. At the same time, Buzha drama also reflects the importance and reverence that Jiarong Tibetans place on religious beliefs, as well as the significant impact of religious beliefs on cultural identity.

However, with the rapid development of modern society and the influence of globalization, Jiarong Tibetan non-material cultural heritage also faces severe challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to protect and inherit Jiarong Tibetan religious culture and non-material cultural heritage. In the process of protecting non-material cultural heritage, we should pay attention to the integration of traditional culture and modern society and ensure that non-material cultural heritage can adapt to the needs of modern society.

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