

# Nuo Masks Reshaping Cultural Imagery in Physical Theatre: A Study of ‘Luocha Land’ by the National Theatre of China (2016)

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## ABSTRACT

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Traditional Chinese Nuo Masks are a core element of Nuo Opera, combining religious ritual and distinctive artistic expression. In contemporary China, the fusion of traditional and modern theatrical styles has become a significant trend. *Luocha Land* (2016), produced by the National Theatre of China and directed by Zhao Miao, integrates Nuo Masks with physical theatre to create an intercultural theatrical work. This study analyzes the specific ways in which Nuo Masks reconstruct cultural imagery in an intercultural context and examines their implications for the international dissemination of contemporary Chinese theatre. Drawing on theatrical semiotics as its theoretical framework, this study employs content analysis and semi-structured interviews to examine the visual characteristics, material properties, and interactive relationship between the Nuo Masks and actors' body performances. The findings reveal that Nuo Masks have undergone a transformation from traditional ritual symbols to contemporary theatrical icons, reshaping three core cultural imageries: (1) as a physical symbol of cultural internalization, reflecting the coercive nature of acculturation; (2) as a visible medium of identity transformation, externalizing the process of identity change; and (3) as a channel for cross-cultural empathy, revealing universal emotions that transcend cultural differences. These insights offer effective pathways for the international dissemination of traditional Chinese theatrical art and contribute to the broader discourse on intercultural performance practice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional Chinese Nuo Masks are the core element of Nuo Opera, a traditional Chinese theatre. Nuo Masks have been continuously inherited and innovated in the historical process of the development of Chinese theatre. Nuo Opera, one of China's oldest folk cultural phenomena, involves performers wearing masks to perform rituals to exorcise demons, dispel plague, and pray for blessings. This performance tradition, imbued with a strong sense of religious and ritual, holds a significant position and significance in the history of theatrical development (Wang, 2004). The masks worn by actors in Nuo Opera are called Nuo Masks. These masks create an atmosphere of mystery, strangeness, and absurdity, an important element in attracting contemporary audiences (Gao & Weng, 2017). In this cultural context, the research objectives of this

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paper are to analyze the specific ways and expressions of Nuo Masks in reconstructing cultural images in an intercultural context, and to summarize the inspiration of Nuo Masks for the international dissemination of contemporary Chinese theatre.

Physical theatre officially entered China in the early 21st century. It was originally an imitation of Western forms. However, as it developed, it gradually integrated with traditional Chinese theatre and culture, forming a localized physical theatre with Chinese elements (Luo, 2022). Traditional Nuo Masks, as an important symbolic element of traditional Chinese theatre, carry the cultural memory and spiritual continuity of the Chinese nation. In 2018, Chinese leader Xi Jinping defined the national spirit as the spirit of great creativity, great striving, great unity, and great dreams (Hao, 2023). He emphasized the need for innovation in literary and artistic creation, emphasizing that outstanding works are an important reflection of the innovative capacity and level of national culture (Ma, 2021). Therefore, the combination of traditional theatrical symbols and modern theatrical forms has become an important exploration direction for China's contemporary theatrical performing arts.

The National Theatre of China, a national art troupe directly managed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, has promoted the creation and dissemination of many experimental plays, with 'Luocha Land' being a prime example. 'Luocha Land' was adapted in 2008 by screenwriter Huang Weiruo from the Qing Dynasty novel 'Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio: Luocha Mirage' by Pu Songling. This is a story about people and ghosts. Since its premiere in 2016, 'Luocha Land' has been performed over 60 times in China and other countries. Incorporating traditional Chinese elements such as Nuo Masks and Opera, it is an experimental work. In 2017, it was performed in Kazakhstan, France, and the United Kingdom. From 2016 to 2018, it was performed in Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai (Zhao, 2022). The work was invited to participate in the 3rd China Original Theatre Invitational Exhibition in 2017 and won the 'Best Young Performer Award' at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In 2020, it won an award at the 27th Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festival (China, 2020). Regarding 'Luocha Land,' Zhao (2017) stated that the work presents 'a quirky and bizarre story, exploring themes of love, beauty, and ugliness, and capturing the predicament and contradictions of modern life' (p. 28). He employed physical theatre techniques and incorporated traditional Chinese art elements such as Nuo Masks and shadow puppetry, creating a fusion of tradition and modernity, East and West.

### 1.1 Definition of Terms: Nuo Masks

Nuo Masks are an integral part of traditional Chinese Nuo Culture and a crucial symbol for studying the relationship between traditional theatre and folk beliefs. Nuo Masks serve as a tool for theatrical performance and a medium of communication between humans and gods, and between the real and supernatural worlds. Nuo Masks are the most vivid and direct symbolic elements in Nuo Opera, and wearing them has become a classic hallmark of Nuo performers (Li, 2008). Nuo Masks are typically classic yet exaggerated, depicting vibrant Chinese colors and diverse and distinctive characters. Nuo Masks are seen as symbols and carriers of specific deities, endowed with special powers within the human world (Wang, 2004). In summary, Nuo Masks embody the aesthetic principle of 'revealing the spirit through form' in traditional Chinese theatre, while also carrying symbolic meanings of social psychology and folk beliefs. They serve as both a visual representation of folk ritual culture and a crucial medium for character development and spiritual communication within theatrical performances.

### 1.2 Definition of Terms: Physical Theatre

Physical theatre, a contemporary performing art form centered on the body, emphasizes the use of body movement and spatial relationships to express emotion and narrative. Unlike traditional theatre, which relies on dialogue to drive the plot, physical theatre prioritizes the flow of energy and visual expression through the actors' bodies, making the body the primary medium of dramatic expression. Physical theatre is "a form of theatre performance that uses the actors' bodies and

theatre techniques to narrate the plot, transcending the limitations of language and externalizing the characters' emotions" (Wu, 2018, p. 18). According to Lecoq (2018), in his book *The Poetic Body*, "he founded a drama school in Paris in 1956 to explore new forms distinct from traditional mime" (p. 15). His inspiration came from life itself, and this exploration can be considered the earliest form of physical theatre. He emphasized that actors understand life through body imitation and the reconstruction of situations, which expands their imagination and maximizes the richness of their physical performances. He also leveraged the power of the dramatic story or masks to elevate the performance. After the introduction of physical theatre into China, researcher Tang Jianwei identified "it as a general term used to describe a new form of theatre that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, using the body to convey narrative" (Tang, 2020, p. 74). Overall, the development of physical theatre is the result of a revolution in theatrical language, reflecting modern theatre's rediscovery of the human body as a universal medium of expression. It emphasizes the actor's ability to use the body to shape imagery and convey emotion through movement. It not only breaks down linguistic and cultural boundaries but also broadens audiences' understanding of theatrical meaning, providing a new dimension of communication for intercultural performance.

### 1.3 Definition of Terms: Luocha Land

Luocha Land is a physical theatre production performed by the National Theatre of China in 2016. The National Theatre of China, abbreviated as NTC, is a national art troupe directly under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. The production was directed by Zhao Miao. In 2016, the National Theatre of China invited Zhao Miao to direct. In 2014, Zhao Miao won the Best Director Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Asian Arts Awards, becoming the first mainland Chinese theatre director to do so (Qian, 2018). The production depicts the transformation of values and identity experienced by humans after entering the world of Luocha ghosts. Luocha Land is set on an island surrounded by the sea, inhabited by the ugly and eccentric Luocha ghosts. A human named Ma Ji accidentally arrives in this land and experiences various strange encounters. He gradually adapts to the idea of ugliness as beauty and gives up trying to understand why he ended up there. The appearance of Mu Xiaohong rekindles Ma Ji's desire to escape and return, but it's too late (China, 2016). This work employs the countercultural logic of 'ugliness as beauty' to depict the misaligned values and human dilemmas in contemporary society. The use of Nuo Masks in the work enhances the expressive power of cultural imagery and provides an important analytical example for the study of theatre in an intercultural context.

### 1.4 Definition of Terms: Cultural Imagery

In traditional Chinese culture, 'imagery' is a long-standing aesthetic concept, evolving from the principles of hexagrams to philosophy, poetics, and other fields. Imagery is essentially a combination of 'meaning' and 'image.' "Meaning refers to the mind's thoughts, while image refers to the physical environment or physical space displayed" (Du, 2024, p. 3). Within an artwork, 'meaning' manifests as the work's underlying ideological content and emotional direction, while 'image' is a concrete representation refined through artistic refinement and abstract generalization (Liang, 2022).

When this 'imagery' acquires specific cultural connotations, it becomes a 'cultural imagery.' These cultural imageries are "images imbued with cultural significance. They are cultural symbols generated within a specific cultural environment, possessing relatively fixed, unique cultural meanings and strong contextual adaptability" (Fang, 2004, p. 310). This special cultural symbol maintains the stability of its core meaning while exhibiting rich adaptability in different contexts. It serves as an important vehicle for the inheritance and expression of national culture.

In this study, 'cultural imagery' specifically refers to the three core symbolic systems reconstructed by the Nuo Masks in the contemporary theatre 'Luocha Land'. First, the combination of the Nuo Masks' visual symbols and specific body language symbolizes the coercive shaping of individual identity by cultural power. Second, the Nuo Masks' manipulable nature depicts the dynamic process of identity transformation. Third, the contrast between the Nuo Masks' alienated

appearance and moments of human brilliance reveals universal emotions that transcend cultural differences. These three cultural imageries collectively constitute the innovative expression of the Nuo Masks in a contemporary intercultural context, embodying the rebirth and transformation of traditional symbols in modern artistic creation.

### **1.5 Problem Statement**

Contemporary Chinese society is undergoing a process of diversification, informatization, and industrialization. This development is changing people's lifestyles and influencing their aesthetic senses, posing new challenges to the development of theatre. Contemporary theatre needs to adapt to current trends and social development, seeking innovative and viable paths for development. The integration of traditional Chinese theatre elements with modern theatrical forms offers new opportunities (Tang, 2010). At the same time, in the context of globalization, different cultures need bridges of communication and understanding. Chinese intercultural theatre has built a platform for Chinese traditional and modern culture to 'go global' and communicate with cultures in other countries.

Nowadays, traditional theatre is gradually being marginalized among audiences. Statistics show that the audience for traditional Chinese theatre is primarily retired cadres, senior intellectuals, and a small number of university students. However, young Chinese audiences represent a significant segment of cultural consumption and constitute the mainstream of contemporary theatre audiences (Han, 2006). Most of the contemporary theatre market comprises young people aged 20 to 37, primarily university students and urban professionals (Tong, 2017). Young audiences seek fresh and cross-disciplinary art forms. They have limited interest in purely traditional theatre and are more receptive to innovative and integrated contemporary expressions. These challenges are even more pronounced in intercultural communication. The essence of theatre lies in 'viewing,' and viewing behavior in intercultural theatre is particularly complex due to the current multicultural environment. As the global performing arts continue to move towards intercultural exchange and integration, audience mobility and diversity have driven innovation in intercultural theatre, influencing its artistic form and aesthetic structure. Intercultural theatre has led to the formation of a new viewing aesthetic characterized by three essential aspects. Firstly, the presence of difference compels audiences to transcend their inherent aesthetic habits. Secondly, artistic innovation promotes the integration of different cultural forms. Thirdly, intensified performativity triggers a conceptual shift. Performativity triggers conceptual change (He, 2021). These new viewing characteristics offer innovative approaches and methods for addressing cultural barriers and promoting understanding and empathy in contemporary cultural communication.

Against this backdrop, the use of traditional Chinese cultural elements in physical theatre has garnered significant attention from Chinese theatre directors and scholars, becoming a popular research topic within the field of theatrical arts. Nuo Masks, as a vital component of traditional Chinese culture and a representative element of traditional Chinese theatre, have attracted widespread discussion and attention in Chinese physical theatre. "On May 25, 2006, with the approval of the State Council, China's highest administrative body, the Nuo Masks was inscribed on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List" (Geng, 2015, p. 51). Chinese Nuo Masks boast a history spanning thousands of years. Combining the dual cultural characteristics of religion and folk art, they have integrated local customs and cultures throughout their development and evolution, embodying the wisdom of ethnic folk artists (Li, 2008). However, there is an obvious structural imbalance in the current research and application of Nuo Masks. Research indicates that exploring, developing, and promoting the culture associated with Nuo Masks will contribute to cultural heritage and promote their preservation, while also generating economic benefits for local communities (Huang & Deng, 2023). In some Chinese cities, governments, cultural institutions, and intangible cultural heritage research centers organize Nuo Opera performances and international seminars. They also actively explore elements of Nuo Masks, dances, and rituals, develop cultural and creative products, and create distinctive cultural tourism attractions, thereby increasing the visibility of Nuo Masks. However, historically, research data on Nuo has been fragmented and insufficient, significantly hindering in-depth exploration and development (Yang, 1994). Wang (2004) noted that Nuo Sacrificial Rituals and Nuo Operas are brief and

mysterious, and once the performance is over, it is difficult to reproduce the complete details. No one can accurately know the details. Furthermore, during certain historical periods, Nuo culture was criticized and destroyed because it was considered 'feudal superstition,' and Nuo Masks were classified as 'Four Olds' and destroyed (Liu, 2013). Consequently, the contemporary presence of Nuo Masks is limited, and related research has largely remained confined to its historical and religious dimensions.

This current state of research stands in stark contrast to the realities of intercultural communication. In the context of globalization, performance is inevitably moving towards interculturality, which requires us not only to protect traditional cultural symbols but also to explore creative ways to transform them in the contemporary context. Overall, current research on Nuo Masks is clearly insufficient. While the history and culture of Nuo Opera and Nuo Masks have been extensively explored, research on how contemporary physical theatre, an art form that emphasizes bodily narrative, can be activated into new cultural imagery and transformed into intercultural symbols through the intercultural theatrical aesthetic principles of difference, innovation, and performance remains relatively limited. Specifically, how does the traditional Chinese Nuo Masks, with its profound cultural heritage, undergo creative transformation in intercultural works like the physical theatre 'Luocha Land'? How does it employ visual symbolism and physical performance to construct new cultural imagery that retains traditional characteristics while possessing international appeal? And how can this imagery guide audiences from diverse backgrounds to achieve effective intercultural understanding? Exploring these questions not only concerns the artistic achievement of this work but also how to help traditional Chinese culture achieve contemporary transformation and establish intercultural communication within the context of globalization. This study, based on these questions, analyzes the cultural imagery reimagined through the Nuo Masks in 'Luocha Land' and explores innovative ways to incorporate traditional Chinese cultural symbols into intercultural understanding.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional Nuo Masks are the core visual symbols and stylistic tools of Chinese Nuo Opera. Currently, research on Nuo Masks in China focuses primarily on their historical origins and cultural connotations. Nuo Masks are a crucial vehicle for Nuo Culture, embodying diverse relationships between humans and gods, ghosts, ancestors, and nature (Zhang, 1991). From the perspective of historical development, Nuo Opera, a form of theatre that evolved from Nuo rituals and dances, is a product of the integration of religious and theatrical cultures. Nuo Masks have become its most representative visual symbol and formative tool (Tuo, 1997). Qu Liuyi (1990), a renowned Nuo Opera researcher, argues that "Nuo Opera is a theatre form that evolved from Nuo Sacrificial Rituals, integrating religious culture and folk art from ancient times to modern times" (Tuo, 1997, p. 69). Within this process, Nuo Masks are the most representative visual symbol and modeling tool. The Nuo Masks' central role in Nuo Opera and its profound cultural heritage have laid a solid foundation for its creative transformation within the contemporary theatrical context. This historical accumulation has established the Nuo Masks' crucial position in traditional Chinese culture and demonstrated their transformative potential in contemporary artistic creation. With the changing times and social development, the form and function of the Nuo Masks have also undergone a profound evolution.

Nuo Masks are crucial props used in Nuo Opera to transform actors' appearances and roles, and they also serve as an external expression of primitive religious beliefs and sorcery. Used by shamans as a medium for communicating with the spirits, Nuo Masks have become an essential symbol of Nuo Culture (Weng, 2008). The earliest origins of Nuo Masks can be traced back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties in ancient China. The 'Book of Zhou: Xiaguan, Sima Xia' records a figure wearing a bear skin, with four golden eyes adorning his head. He wears black clothing and a red skirt, holds a weapon, and leads a group in Nuo Rituals to exorcise ghosts and evil forces (Lin, 2001). The figure, clad in a bear skin and adorned with four golden eyes, is believed to be the earliest Nuo Mask in China. Throughout history, Nuo Masks have continuously blended and evolved across different periods, regions, and ethnic groups (Li, 2013). Nuo Masks have evolved from ritual

instruments symbolizing divine power to tools for character creation in Nuo Opera, reflecting the increasing secularization of Nuo culture itself (Guo, 2018). The transformation of Nuo Masks from traditional ritual to modern performance aligns with the inherent needs of intercultural theatre development in the era of globalization. When traditional Nuo Masks are incorporated into contemporary physical theatre, their symbolic meanings and expressions face the opportunity to be redefined and reinterpreted. This transformation requires preserving the essence of traditional culture while supporting modern theatre, enabling the contemporary transformation and intercultural dissemination of traditional symbols.

To further understand the cultural imagery reconstructed by the Nuo Mask in contemporary theatre, theatrical semiotics provides an effective analytical approach. The relationship between ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ in theatrical semiotics reveals the connection between the material and meaning levels of stage symbols. The signifier refers to a concrete symbolic form such as sound, image, or object, while the signified carries the conceptual or emotional content behind the symbol. Theatrical codes, as conventional semiotic rules, form the foundation of theatrical expression and audience reception (Hu, 2015). In the physical theatre of Luocha Land, the Nuo Masks, as a special cultural symbol, carry traditional theatrical codes, including sacred symbols in religious rituals and role identity identifiers. At the same time, in this new context, through its integration with body language, it breaks through the boundaries of a single culture, achieving the reconstruction and intercultural dissemination of cultural imagery. Physical theatre inherently relies on the body as the core medium for the transmission of meaning (Pitches, 2007). China's introduction to Western physical theatre theory was relatively late, primarily influenced by the work of Jacques Lecoq, and was not officially introduced until 2002 (Wu, 2018). Since then, Chinese theatre professionals have actively promoted the integration of Western physical theatre concepts with traditional Chinese performance elements, such as Nuo Masks, Opera movements, and shadow puppetry, creating a physical theatre style with distinctive local aesthetics (Xue, 2023). This integration has not only promoted the innovative development of Chinese physical theatre but also broadened the scope of its works' acceptance by international audiences.

The physical theatre ‘Luocha Land,’ produced by the National Theatre of China and directed by Zhao Miao, is a representative work of this fusion trend. Since its premiere in 2016, the work has been performed over 60 times in China and abroad, participating in numerous international theatre festivals and winning numerous awards (China, 2020). Song (2017) noted that Zhao Miao continues his creative approach of combining Western physical theatre methods with traditional Chinese cultural symbols, highlighting the contemporary nature of the theatre. While some dialogue is retained in the work, the core narrative is conveyed through the combination of Nuo Masks and the actors' body language. Cao (2017) also noted that the masks in the play offer contemporary innovations based on traditional Nuo forms, with a variety of wearable methods designed to expand the performance freedom and expressive dimensions, allowing the audience to focus more on the narrative power of body movements.

In summary, existing research has yielded insights into the historical origins and cultural significance of Nuo Masks, laying the groundwork for their innovative application in contemporary theatre. However, research on the intercultural symbolic transformation and cultural imagery of Nuo Masks in physical theatre remains insufficient. Studies of intercultural physical theatre, such as ‘Luocha Land,’ have shown that Nuo Masks, while retaining their cultural roots, have undergone a contemporary transformation, enriched the artistic expression of theatre and offering new possibilities for intercultural theatrical exchange. Building bridges for intercultural dialogue and understanding based on artistic integration, they promote the coexistence and development of diverse cultures.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employed qualitative analysis, combining content analysis with semi-structured interviews, to explore the mechanisms by which Nuo Masks reshape cultural imagery in the physical theatre ‘Luocha Land.’ The content analysis

primarily drew upon video footage of the 'Luocha Land' performance and related literature, including performance recordings, interviews, and articles by director Zhao Miao, academic papers, and other research on Nuo Masks. Using the framework of theatrical semiotics, the analysis focused on the Nuo Mask's signifiers, such as shape, color, material, and wearing method, and the signified meanings it generates in conjunction with body movement, staging, and lighting effects during performance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with director Zhao Miao and a lead actor. The interview outlines covered topics such as creative concepts, rehearsal practices for coordinating Nuo Masks with body movements, symbolic design, and intercultural audience reception strategies. This study sought to uncover the specific ways and effects of Nuo Masks in reshaping cultural imagery in contemporary physical theatre, thereby addressing the issue of modernizing traditional symbols in intercultural theatrical creation.

## **4. RESEARCH DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Physical Symbols of Cultural Internalization**

Nuo Masks are symbols imbued with cultural significance. In works, the combination of Nuo Masks and physical performance embodies the coercive shaping of individual identity by cultural power. It has become a tool for training rules and a physical symbol of cultural internalization. At the same time, the Nuo Masks serve as both the external decoration of the figure and the medium for embodying cultural rules. The physical properties of the Nuo Masks and the performers' physical expressions together construct a new theatrical code, making the abstract process of 'cultural internalization' visible and perceptible. 'Cultural internalization' refers to the formation of new mental processes within social and cultural activities, which in turn control higher-level psychological functions. This is the process of internalization (Wei, 2015). Simply put, cultural internalization here means turning the cultural rules that exist in society into a part of one's own psychology and behavior. The essence of this process is to transform social and cultural rules into a part of the individual's psychological structure.

The Nuo Mask's iconic 'Golden Four-Eyed' form serves as a direct visual signifier. It originates from the image of the Fangxiangshi in ancient Chinese Nuo Rituals. Its original signified was a sacred deity that exorcises evil. However, in this work, this visual signifier undergoes a significant transformation, taking on a new meaning. The Nuo Mask becomes a mandatory symbol of Luocha Land's cultural norm of 'ugliness as beauty.' The mask's inhuman form, four eyes, and ferocious expression directly dictate the performer's inhuman body language. For example, the performer must maintain a sideways bend at the waist, lean forward in a Z-curve, walk with forceful thighs, stomping heavily, and employ numerous lateral movements or mechanical, short steps. These animal-like body postures, as a kind of bodily signifier, collectively point to the new meanings of 'cultural alienation' and 'identity transformation.'

Actor Wu Di (personal interview, May 14, 2025), who plays Lord Muyi, mentioned that his character is the king of Luocha Land. His mask is the largest in the entire production. This creates an imbalance between him and the average character, as well as between his body and the visual center of gravity. He needs to use exaggerated body movements to balance this imbalance. During the performance, it is evident that Lord Muyi increased the weight of his steps and amplified his jumps, underscoring the character's authority and sense of oppression within the hierarchical system. This physical expression reflects the disciplined role of Nuo Masks in performing, demonstrating the process by which cultural power is constantly reenacted and reproduced through the body.

At the material level, the material properties of the Nuo Masks further reinforce the theatrical performance of the rule-based training. Traditional Nuo Masks are typically made of wood materials such as poplar and willow. The Nuo Masks in this work are crafted using traditional Chinese shadow puppetry for the first time, resulting in a relatively light texture. However, this seemingly light visual signifier contrasts sharply with the signified, which is deliberately heavy and

clumsy, expressed by the actor's body movements. 'The Nuo Mask also constrains the body. I must change my physical posture according to the mask, for example, I usually choose to walk sideways' (Wu, personal interview, May 14, 2025). This tension between the material and the physical performance externalizes the character's discomfort and passivity during the process of cultural adaptation, artistically expressing the individual's repression and compliance during the process of 'cultural internalization.'

Furthermore, the color coding of Nuo Masks plays a crucial role in constructing meaning. Its color system draws on the traditional symbolic codes of Chinese Opera facial makeup. For example, within a given cultural context, red, blue, and green represent loyalty, bravery, unwavering resolve, and cunning, respectively. The signifiers and signifieds of these colors originally had stable cultural correspondences, but as the plot unfolds, these correspondences are deliberately subverted. The characters' personalities and destinies are reversed, and the symbolic meanings behind traditional colors such as loyalty and treachery, good and evil, are subverted, thus creating a strong ironic effect. This deliberate misuse of traditional symbolic codes challenges the established cultural symbolic system, deconstructing the fixed connection between appearance and essence, and demonstrating how cultural norms shape and constrain individual behavior.

In summary, in Luocha Land, the Nuo Masks transcend their traditional religious function of exorcism and become a symbolic vehicle for cultural internalization. Its visual symbolism is systematically integrated with specific body language, and the relationship between signifier and signified is reconstructed. In the work, the Nuo Masks cease to be sacred masks designed to ward off evil. It becomes a powerful cultural symbol, vividly demonstrating how external cultural rules, through the dual effects of physical training and visual symbolism, shape and even distort individual identity.

#### **4.2 Visible Medium for Identity Transformation**

The Nuo Masks, in this work, exhibits manipulable physical properties, with the actor acting as the containers of performance and expression. It transforms the abstract process of character transformation into a visible, dynamic, theatre action on stage. The synergistic shifts between the Nuo Mask and the actor's physical movements form a clearly legible symbolic system, effectively conveying the complex themes of identity, performance, and cultural adaptation.

From a theatrical semiotic perspective, the signifier of the Nuo Masks lies in its physical mobility and manipulability. For example, in the performance of the Luocha ghost Pilipidun, the act of rotating the mask serves as a signifier, instantly switching the character's facial expression from ferocious to smiling, or shy to sad. The signifier of the Nuo Mask is not a single emotion, but rather the flexible shifting of the character's identity across different stories and cultural contexts. More importantly, this signifier directly triggers a physical signifier. As the mask rotates, the actor's body language shifts synchronously, from a defensive posture of hunched back and kneeling to a gentle, approachable gesture. Furthermore, Nuo Masks can be worn in various ways within the work, such as by hand or headband, expanding performance possibilities and making identity transitions more fluid and varied. These factors demonstrate that, in the work, Nuo Masks are no longer merely a tool for concealing the face; they themselves have become highly concentrated performance movements, directing the character's shifts in emotions and identities. A particularly representative example is the performance of the Luocha ghost Pilipidun using a handheld mask. When she performs with a handheld mask, this action serves as a signifier, forming a visual metaphor for the coexistence of savagery and tamedness. Simultaneously, her other hand is freed, allowing for even more complex hand movements, sometimes sharp like a claw, sometimes gentle like a caress. This method of performance allows the character to rapidly switch between human and animal identities, creating immense theatre tension.

In the work, the actors' actions of donning and removing masks are further imbued with ritualized symbolic meaning. When Ma Ji dons the mask, he actively mimics the authoritative body posture of the Luocha ghost, his back arched and his heavy gait conveying the signified of a change in identity. This process is depicted as a clear physical transformation. His



spine gradually straightens, his head maintains a fixed angle of elevation, and his arm movements become mechanical and forceful. Conversely, when he and Mu Xiaohong remove the mask, their bodies immediately relax, their shoulders drop, their breathing becomes natural, and their fingers loosen their tension, returning to their human form. This contrasting relationship between signifier and signified externalizes an internal identity crisis into a visible, ongoing bodily ritual.

Furthermore, the physical ownership of the mask becomes a signifier of power relations. Judge Zhou picks up the discarded masks of Ma Ji and Mu Xiaohong. This action signifies far more than simply picking up a prop. It symbolizes the power of power systems not only to grant identity but also to deprive, tamper with, and ultimately control the narrative of individual identity. In this scene, Judge Zhou's fingers slowly trace the mask's surface before firmly grasping it. This subtle gesture further reinforces the image of power possession. The mask thus becomes a core symbol in power dynamics, making abstract cultural politics tangible.

In summary, the Nuo Masks, through their manipulable physical properties, are deeply integrated with the performer's physical performance, recast as a visible medium for identity transformation. This cultural image transforms the invisible process of identity transformation and acculturation into a series of clear and dynamic stage symbols, enabling intercultural audiences to intuitively understand the complexity and power of identity performance and effectively disseminate traditional cultural symbols in a contemporary intercultural context.

### **4.3 Channel of Empathy Beyond Cultural Representations**

The unique symbolic use of Nuo Masks in the work 'Luocha Land' creates a channel of empathy that transcends cultural representations. The Nuo Masks possess a paradoxical quality: their appearance makes a potent visual signifier of 'inhumanity' for the audience, with features like four eyes and fangs, establishing a sense of alienated cultural identity. However, through these alienating 'inhumanity' representations, the masks also create moments that break cultural norms and reveal universal humanity, making them more precious and impactful.

The Nuo Masks serve two symbolic functions in the work. Its primary signifier is the fixed, inhuman appearance of the 'Luocha ghost,' such as its four eyes and fangs. It signifies alienated cultural identities and norms. However, this stable relationship between signifier and signified provides a subversive, contrasting framework for flashes of humanity within the work. When characters suddenly violate the behavioral logic prescribed by the mask, these actions become new, more powerful signifiers. In the iconic scene where Lord Muyi protects Muxiaohong, he stands before her with his arms outstretched. As the king of Luocha Land, his body should lean back in authority, but now he leans forward in a protective gesture. The dramatic power of this gesture stems from its break with his previous behavioral patterns. This shift in body language speaks to a universal, intercultural instinct for protection and fatherhood. Another example is Pilipidun's final moments. As she struggles to utter the human word 'go,' the human face revealed from the side of the mask transcends her usual animalistic posture. It is particularly noteworthy that in this scene, her fingers, which were always kept in a claw shape, become soft and gently extend in the direction of Ma Ji. This subtle movement forcefully points to the universal human nature of sacrifice and redemption.

The reason these 'human moments' in Luocha Land have such a powerful emotional impact is precisely because they create a stark contrast with the alienated context established by the masks. The more solid the mask's 'inhuman' signifier, the more dazzling the radiant humanity it reveals when it is broken. As director Zhao Miao explained, this work primarily addresses and resolves cultural conflict. 'We want to resolve conflict, break down barriers, and bring everyone into a cultural context to tell the story. Masks are the breakthrough point we found' (Zhao, personal interview, May 14, 2025). This narrative strategy, constructed by Nuo Masks, is not used to highlight the strangeness of culture but to guide the audience in penetrating the external appearance of culture and perceiving the common human emotions and moral intuitions beneath the surface. During the performance, the Luocha ghost Pilipidun's body posture shifts from her typical

Luocha ghost stance to a more human-like, relaxed state. This change provides emotional preparation for her subsequent decision to sacrifice herself, allowing intercultural audiences to transcend cultural differences, shed unfamiliar cultural symbols, and directly experience the emotional connections between the characters and the core of their humanity.

Thus, the Nuo Masks were ultimately reshaped into a channel of empathy that transcended cultural representations. By reinforcing the signifiers of cultural differences, the Nuo Masks ultimately pointed to emotions and values shared by all humanity, transcending specific cultures. This symbolic application effectively circumvented the barriers of language and specific cultural knowledge, directly triggering understanding and empathy among intercultural audiences, thus fulfilling the artistic function of theatre as a 'human community.'

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study examines the reimagining of Nuo Masks as cultural imagery in the physical theatre 'Luocha Land,' focusing on their use on stage. The results indicate that Nuo Masks have creatively transformed from sacred symbols in traditional rituals into contemporary theatrical symbols, constructing three interrelated core cultural imagery: 'physical symbols of cultural internalization,' 'visible media for identity transformation,' and 'channels of empathy that transcend cultural representations.'

First, the Nuo Masks are no longer merely sacred symbols used in traditional religious rituals to ward off evil and misfortune. Instead, it has been recast as a 'bodily symbol' embodying cultural power and the discipline of bodily discipline. In this work, the fusion of masks and physical performance crystallizes the abstract process of cultural internalization into a perceptible stage symbol. The masks, with their impersonal form, color coding, and material characteristics, construct a visual cultural order. Simultaneously, the performer's physical movements are shaped, adjusted, and even distorted within this order, demonstrating the cultural power of the interplay between vision and the body, which achieves the internalization and standardization of individual identity. This 'cultural internalization' performance shows the modern regeneration and critical function of traditional symbols in contemporary intercultural theatre.

Secondly, the Nuo Masks are reimagined in the work as a dynamic medium for identity transformation, becoming a performance tool for actors to shift between different cultural identities. Nuo Masks, with their flexible manipulation capabilities, such as rotation and hand-holding, collaborate with body movements to create a narrative. The masks are not a fixed symbol of human nature, but an active signifier that participates in shaping a character's identity. The actions of donning, doffing, holding, and rotating the mask, as well as its shifting affiliation between characters, become dynamic symbols representing the game of power and identity. Through the subtle changes in the actors' bodies, the audience can 'see' the process of cultural adaptation and the alternation of power. Nuo Masks transform the abstract process of identity transformation into a visual symbol and a visible stage ritual that is intuitively understandable to audiences across cultures.

Finally, in 'Luocha Land,' the Nuo Masks achieve a transition from cultural alienation to emotional connection, becoming a channel of empathy that transcends cultural representations. It's the visually 'inhumanity' image that initially creates a sense of cultural distance. Still, it is precisely this sense of alienation that allows the characters to transcend the behavioral logic of the mask and reveal their humanity at specific moments, creating a deeply impactful emotional contrast. The Nuo Masks' symbolic transformation thus transcends cultural boundaries, enabling intercultural audiences to connect directly with the characters' emotional core and universal humanity. This fulfills the director's creative vision of 'bringing Chinese theatre abroad and bringing international audiences in' (Zhao, personal interview, May 14, 2025), achieving a narrative transformation 'from culture to humanity.'

Overall, this study confirms that the Nuo Masks in ‘Luocha Land ’ have evolved from a traditional religious symbol into a theatrical one, reshaping contemporary and intercultural imagery and promoting intercultural understanding. Analyzing from the perspectives of ‘cultural internalization,’ ‘identity transformation,’ and ‘emotional connection,’ this study suggests that the value of the Nuo Masks in contemporary intercultural theatre lies in its formal re-creation of tradition, its reconstruction of symbolic systems, and its regeneration of meaning. This research offers new insights into the recontextualization of traditional theatrical symbols in contemporary performing arts, providing a valuable avenue for the international dissemination of traditional Chinese theatrical art.

However, this study also has certain limitations. Due to the limited scope of interviewees, the practical experience presented in the study mainly focuses on the perspective of representative actors and directors, lacking broader audience feedback and international comparisons. In addition, this article has not yet explored in depth the comprehensive interaction between Nuo Masks and other stage elements, such as music, lighting, and stage design, which has also limited the comprehensiveness of the study to a certain extent. There is still broad room for exploration in the innovative use of Nuo Masks, a traditional symbol, in contemporary theatre. It can not only be applied to drama, but also inspire dance, film, and even digital media art. Continuing to explore the modern expression of traditional cultural symbols will help to build a more inclusive and dialogical intercultural art landscape.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. No external funding was received, and the authors have no conflicting interests to disclose.

## **AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS**

Churong Xiao: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing; Norzizi Zulkafli: Conceptualisation, supervision, validation, and writing—review and editing.

## **ETHICS STATEMENT**

This study involved semi-structured interviews with human participants. This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participant data were anonymised and treated with strict confidentiality throughout the research process. No personal identifying information has been disclosed in this publication.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the

ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and data anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study.

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