Sacred Space, Musical Experience and Narrative Performance — A Study of the Arts-Therapy Mechanism of the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) Ritual Drama in Xiangxi

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Abstract: The Tujia nuo opera in Xiangxi is a comprehensive ritual art integrating sacrifice, drama, music and dance, and its "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) ritual contains rich folk healing wisdom. This article takes the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" of Xiangxi as its object of study. Combining fieldwork with documentary research, it examines the operational logic of the ritual's healing mechanism from the interdisciplinary perspective of arts therapy. The study finds that the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" achieves its healing function through a fourfold mechanism. Survival anxiety acts as the generative motive and constitutes the psychological foundation of nuo opera healing. Sacred space provides the field-based foundation, evoking a sense of security and belonging by means of sympathetic magic and the collective unconscious. Musical experience serves as the guiding mechanism, achieving emotional catharsis and transformation through the ISO principle. Narrative performance offers spiritual support, providing encouragement and cultural identity through archetypal narrative and comic performance. The study shows that the healing practice of Tujia nuo opera is a kind of "cultural psychotherapy" rooted in the local belief system. It can provide important ethnic cultural resources for the localized development of modern arts therapy.
***Keywords*:** Xiangxi Tujia nuo opera; arts therapy; cultural function; belief; healing

1. Introduction

The Tujia of Xiangxi are an ethnic minority with a long history in central and western China. Its culture is an important component of China's ethnic minority cultures. The Tujia people hope, through the ritual of "sacrificing to the gods and expelling ghosts," to pray for the protection of ancestors and deities and to ward off evil ghosts and malevolent spirits. Within the archaic shamanic nuo (exorcistic ritual) tradition, accumulated and transmitted over time, the tima (Tujia ritual specialist) integrates speech and song, masks, music, and dance. Through these media the tima enacts religious stories, productive labor, social life, historical change, and folk legend, forming "Xiangxi Tujia nuo opera" [1]. Within this belief system, a generalized anxiety prevails among the Tujia population, arising from the inability to grasp the relationship between oneself and the external world. It can often be alleviated or overcome through the performance of nuo opera.

Art therapy is primarily based on the process in which various human artistic forms of expression, after being expressed or manifested, positively act upon the human body, mind, and spirit. It is not difficult to find that the therapeutic effect of art and the overcoming of anxiety by nuo opera share a commonality between the two processes. Psychologists hold that this commonality is the manifestation of the human collective unconscious [2]. Based on the above definition, this article mainly attempts to examine and study the Tujia nuo opera in Xiangxi from the perspective of "art therapy."

Regarding interdisciplinary research on shamanic ritual and arts therapy, the academic community has formed multi-dimensional paths of exploration. Lévi-Strauss pioneered the research tradition of shamanic medical culture [3]; Thomas, Howard, MacKinnon and others expanded the boundaries of research from the levels of ethnographic case studies and interdisciplinary comparison [4][5][6]. Li Shiwu systematically analyzed the purposive relationship between magical anxiety and arts therapy [7]. Fu Cong, taking the Khorchin Mongolian shamanic ritual as object, excavated indigenous healing wisdom [8]. At the level of ontological research on nuo opera, Xiong Xiaohui [9], Chen Ying [10] and others carried out examinations from the dimensions of musical morphology and aesthetics, while Wen Li [11] further introduced a semiotic perspective to expand the boundaries of research. Overall, existing achievements mostly focus on the artistic ontology of nuo opera or northern shamanic rituals, and research specifically analyzing the complete healing mechanism of the Tujia Huan Yuan Nuo from the perspective of arts therapy remains relatively scarce. Based on this, the present article sorts out the historical context and ritual morphology of Huan Yuan Nuo, deconstructs its multi-layered healing logic, and provides a theoretical reference for the localization of arts therapy and the living transmission of ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage.

2. The Historical Context of the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) Ritual Drama

2.1 The Nuo Tradition and the Cultural Soil of the Tujia People

As the core ritual type of Tujia nuo opera, the "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) has its historical origins deeply rooted in the profound integration of China's ancient shamanic nuo (exorcistic ritual) cultural tradition and the indigenous beliefs of the Tujia people. Nuo is one of China's oldest religious rituals, its core function being to drive out ghosts and expel epidemics, to pray for blessings and avert disasters. Over the course of its long historical development, shamanic nuo culture gradually spread from the Central Plains to all parts of the country, combining with the indigenous cultures of various ethnic groups to form local nuo opera forms each with distinctive characteristics. The Tujia people have always "revered shamans and esteemed ghosts"; this shamanic tradition was an important social condition enabling nuo sacrifices to spread widely in Tujia regions. Nuo opera, also called nuo hall opera or nuo deity opera, is extremely closely related to the primitive shamanic religion and sorcery of the Tujia, and is an important vehicle of Tujia primitive religious belief. The Tujia ancestors worshipped numerous deities such as the Nuo deity, the Eight Tribal Great Deities, and the Earth God; this primitive belief was fused with social production, entertainment activities, and ethnic customs. Therefore the earliest "chong nuo huan yuan" (exorcising nuo and fulfilling vows) carried obvious religious colouring, and among the Tujia masses there is the saying "one nuo drives out a hundred ghosts, one vow settles a thousand deities."

Viewed from the perspective of its developmental trajectory, the Tujia nuo opera of Xiangxi underwent a long process of evolution from nuo, to nuo dance, to nuo ritual, and then to nuo opera. Nuo dance originated in the age of primitiveness. In the course of struggling against nature and against venomous insects and fierce beasts, the Tujia ancestors produced a primordial nuo dance, in which the face was costumed and protected as a disguise, and they leaped and shouted to the sound of drum and music. After nuo dance combined with nuo sacrifice, contents such as praying for the safety of humans and livestock, for abundant harvests of the five grains, and for commemorating ancestors were added. It gradually formed a sacrificial custom song-and-dance that possessed both the propagation of religious doctrine and an entertainment character; the Tujia nuo opera of Xiangxi developed on this foundation. The Tujia region of Xiangxi is mountainous and remote, with inconvenient transportation; this relatively closed geographical environment enabled the ancient shamanic nuo culture to be preserved in a relatively complete form, having been subjected to comparatively little impact from the outside world.

2.2 The Formation of the "Huan Yuan" (Fulfilling the Vow) Belief and Its Ritualized Development

The "fulfilling the vow" belief is the core dynamic mechanism for the survival of Tujia nuo opera. The Tujia nuo opera in Xiangxi is essentially a drama performed by the Tujia people to welcome the nuo deities, ward off epidemics and dispel disasters, and to repay the nuo deities by fulfilling vows; its emergence and development have always been closely linked with the "fulfilling the vow" belief. In the conception of the Tujia people, when they encounter difficulties such as illness, disaster, or infertility, they make vows to the nuo deities and other spirits; after the vows are fulfilled, they then hold a grand nuo opera ritual to thank the deities. This belief practice model of "making a vow—fulfilling the vow" constitutes the internal driving force for the inheritance and development of Tujia nuo opera.

The Tujia "fulfilling the vow" underwent a developmental process from simple to complex and from singular to comprehensive. The early vow fulfillment rituals were relatively simple, consisting mainly of sacrifices and prayers. Over time, artistic elements such as song and dance, narrative singing, and drama were gradually incorporated into the rituals, and the content and forms of the rituals became increasingly rich. The developmental process of Tujia nuo opera in Xiangxi was roughly nuo, nuo dance, nuo ritual, and only thereafter did nuo opera emerge. Nuo dance was initially merely a component part of exorcistic disaster-averting sacrificial rituals. Later, content such as prayers for the safety of humans and livestock, abundant harvests of the five grains, commemoration of ancestors, exhortation of people to forsake evil and follow good, and the transmission of production knowledge was gradually added. This formed sacrificial custom song-and-dance that possessed both the function of expounding and propagating religious doctrine and an entertainment nature, on the basis of which nuo opera ultimately developed.

The "fulfilling the vow" ritual possesses strictly normative and highly stylized characteristics. In the Tujia regions of Xiangxi, nuo opera generally comprises twenty-four main plays, that is, twenty-four opera deities; at the conclusion of each nuo ritual, the wu (Tujia ritual practitioner) must burn twenty-four holes into yellow mounting paper with incense fire, thereby signifying the offering of sacrifices to the twenty-four opera deities. Among the twenty-four nuo deities, Jiangnü and Fan Lang, known as the vow fulfillment deities, are two extremely important deities in the votive nuo. In nuo opera, Meng Jiangnü constitutes the climax of the entire performance; after the nuo opera is ordinarily concluded, Jiangnü and Fan Lang, without having removed their costumes, proceed to "bow to the stage" before the host family and the audience, thereby signifying the "completion of the vow."

2.3 Evolution since the Ming and Qing Dynasties and Contemporary Transmission

The Ming and Qing dynasties were an important stage in the development and evolution of the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo (Votive Nuo)." The Ming dynasty's policy of "gaitu guiliu (replacing indigenous rulers with appointed officials)" exerted a profound influence on the development of Tujia nuo opera. Before gaitu guiliu, the Tujia region operated under the tusi (hereditary native chieftain) system, and the "Huan Yuan Nuo" ritual was mainly conducted with the support of the tusi, bearing a strong official character. After gaitu guiliu, the tusi system was abolished, and appointed officials (liuguan) replaced the tusi as local administrative heads; the "Huan Yuan Nuo" ritual gradually moved from the official sphere to the popular sphere, becoming a genuinely folk cultural form.

After the mid-Qing dynasty, nuo opera absorbed the vocal styles and repertoire of other local theatrical genres such as flower-lantern drama, yang opera, and high-pitched tunes, and gradually became increasingly mature. According to Xiong Xiaohui's research, nuo opera and flower-lantern drama shared the same troupes,

A single performance troupe could perform two theatrical genres [9]. During this period, nuo opera had already participated in performances as an independent theatrical genre. In terms of performance form, Tujia nuo opera also underwent an evolution from mask performance to painted-face makeup. The Tongzhi-era Longshan County Gazetteer (Longshan xian zhi) of the Qing dynasty records: "Two images of the nuo deities, male and female, are enshrined in the hall, and offerings of sacrificial victims and fine food are presented. The wu (shaman) wears a paper mask and performs ancient stories like a professional actor." Because paper masks were easily damaged, people gradually switched to painted faces in the course of performance. By the late Qing dynasty, many roles had been changed to painted-face makeup, and some nuo opera troupes even eliminated masks altogether.

In modern and contemporary times, the transmission of the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) has undergone a tortuous course of development. Before the 1950s, nearly every village and stockade in the Tujia areas of Xiangxi had a nuo altar organization. After the founding of New China, for a variety of reasons, "Huan Yuan Nuo" activities gradually declined, but their sung melodies, instrumental pieces, dramatic repertoire and so on continued to circulate tenaciously among the people in another guise. Since the 1980s, with the development of intangible cultural heritage protection work, nuo opera, as a precious cultural heritage, has attracted increasing attention. The discovery of Qing dynasty manuscript copies such as Jiangnü Opera and Gao Nuo · Moving the Vanguard, together with visits and investigations of folk artists and veteran nuo opera ritual specialists, has given us a roughly clear understanding of the general outline of Tujia nuo opera.

3. The Ritual Morphology of the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) Ritual Drama

3.1 Ritual Types and Basic Procedures

The Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) is a comprehensive ritual art integrating sacrifice, drama, music, and dance, whose core function is to repay the gods and redeem vows. According to the different contents of the vows made, "Huan Yuan Nuo" can be divided into various types such as vow fulfillment for seeking offspring, vow fulfillment for curing illness, vow fulfillment for praying for blessings, and vow fulfillment for averting calamities. Different types of vow fulfillment rituals differ in specific procedures and performance content, but their basic structure and core function are consistent. The "Huan Yuan Nuo" ritual is usually held by the sponsoring household inviting a nuo opera troupe to their home, and possesses strict normativity and stylized characteristics. In the Tujia areas of Xiangxi, nuo opera generally has twenty-four main plays, namely the twenty-four opera deities. At the end of each nuo ritual, the wu (Tujia ritual practitioner) must use incense fire to burn twenty-four holes in yellow mounting paper, to signify the offering of sacrifice to the twenty-four opera deities.

Among the twenty-four nuo deities, Jiangnü and Fan Lang, known as the vow fulfillment deities, are two extremely important deities in the performance of the votive nuo ritual. In nuo opera, Meng Jiangnü is the climax of the entire ritual. Ordinarily, after the nuo opera has finished being sung, Jiangnü and Fan Lang, still in costume, go to pay respects to the host family and the audience in a "stage farewell" (baitai), thereby signifying the "completion of the vow" (liaoyuan). This vow fulfillment ritual centred on the legend of Meng Jiangnü is the most representative form of the Tujia "votive nuo" (Huan Nuo Yuan, the fulfillment of a votive nuo vow). It also reflects the deep integration of Han Chinese folk legend with indigenous Tujia belief.

From the perspective of its developmental process, the Tujia "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) underwent three stages of development: the wu-nuo ritual service, the staging of opera on the nuo altar, and the Nuo hall proper drama. In the early period, the votive ritual was dominated by the wu-nuo ritual service, with relatively few dramatic elements. As time progressed, the staging of opera on the nuo altar gradually developed, and dramatic performance became an important component of the

ritual. By the stage of the Nuo hall proper drama, dramatic performance had already become relatively mature, forming a complete repertoire system and performance conventions.

3.2 Musical Forms and Instrumental Characteristics

The music of Tujia nuo opera is an important component of the "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) ritual, possessing distinct ethnic characteristics and ritual functions. The vocal styles of Tujia nuo opera are divided into nuo altar principal opera vocal style and Nuo hall opera vocal style. The former originated from shamanic songs, with relatively simple melodies and rhythms, and its structure retains the original features of shamanic songs. The music of the latter developed under the influence of Xiangxi flower lantern, Chenhe opera, and Yang opera, featuring simple role-based vocal differentiation, with rich melodic variations and prominent individuality.

In terms of musical structure, Tujia nuo opera music derives mainly from Tujia folk songs, narrative-singing music, religious music, folk dance music, and the like. Tujia folk songs are the foundation of Tujia nuo opera. The folk-song elements in nuo opera concentrate multiple genres and forms, including mountain songs, xiaodiao (short tunes), narrative songs and labour songs, as in "Ban Xianfeng" (Staging the Vanguard), "Ban Kaishan" (Staging the Mountain-Opener), and "Ban Suanjiang" (Staging the Diviner). These repertoire pieces not only sacrifice to deities and ancestors but also adopt the form of folk songs to reflect different contents of life, endowing the sung passages with a folk-song style characterized by regular rhythmic phrasing and strong melodiousness. Whether in sacrificial ritual or in dramatic performance, nuo opera consists almost entirely of stylized song-and-dance performance; its tunes mostly belong to the strophic upper-and-lower-phrase structure, with transitions between sections provided entirely by percussion. Singing is predominantly in the form of one leading with the many responding; during the lead singing, percussion is not used, whereas during the chorus, percussion is added. When singing, there is no dancing; when dancing, there is no singing; in most cases, the performers dance to the sound of gongs and drums during the interludes.

In terms of melody and vocal style, Tujia nuo opera music is mostly constituted by the pentatonic scale, predominantly employing the shang, yu and zhi modes (the modal degrees of the Chinese pentatonic system), with melodic contours that are not wide-ranging but relatively smooth. Tujia nuo opera vocal music and Tujia folk songs share one common characteristic: they take the "three-tone-row" folk song as their matrix and proliferate qupai (tune titles) from it. In terms of tunes and instrumental music, the vocal style of Tujia nuo opera is "gongs and drums dividing phrases" and "not relying on wind and string accompaniment." In its early period it still retained the tradition of "vocal accompaniment" of shamanic chanting, and after the 1950s suona, erhu and dizi accompaniment were added. Nuo opera has a relatively large number of vocal tunes, the main tunes being Xianfeng Diao, Songzi Qiang, Tudi Qiang, Kaishan Qiang, Tong'er Diao and others. In terms of instrumental usage, the instruments commonly found in Tujia nuo opera include the ma luo (horse gong), zhong luo (medium gong), bo (cymbals), xiao cha (small cymbals), drum, shidao (ritualist's knife), niujiao (ox horn) and other percussion instruments, and accompaniment is one of the principal characteristics of nuo opera.

3.3 Performance Art and Aesthetic Characteristics

In the course of performance and transmission, the Tujia nuo opera of Xiangxi gradually formed its own distinctive artistic characteristics; its ritual is accomplished through song, dance and drama, while its dramatic performance is in turn intermingled with the content of vow-fulfilling sacrifice. This

Ancient artistic forms retain the primordial features of the evolutionary process of performing arts from sacrifice, song and dance, and storytelling-singing to opera.

Comedy is the most prominent artistic characteristic of Tujia nuo opera. The performance of Tujia nuo opera is attached to the religious activity of thanking the gods and fulfilling vows. When inviting the gods, the laosi (ritual master) wears ritual garments, shakes the ritual knife, twirls the ribboned cloth, blows the ox horn, forms hand gestures, treads the eight trigrams, and chants incantations, the atmosphere being extremely solemn. Yet when the main plays are entered and stories are enacted, episodes and language of teasing, mockery and jesting abound. The main plays of Tujia nuo opera are divided by performers into three parts — "upper cave," "middle cave" and "lower cave" — and are known for their humour, jocularity, wit and buffoonery, often making people unable to suppress their laughter. "Entertaining the gods" is a kind of entrustment and expectation, whereas "entertaining people" is the comic soul and source of Tujia nuotang opera. The performers' flexibility and casualness, the dramatic conception centred on the audience, and the broad audience's conception of recreational entertainment characterized by playful laughter and frolic are blended in perfect harmony, thereby forming its distinct and prominent comic consciousness.

The artistic technique of "salty and bland complementing each other" is another important aesthetic characteristic of Tujia nuo opera. The concept of "salty and bland," proposed by Duan Anjie of the Tang Dynasty in his Yuefu Zalu (Miscella-

neous Records of the Music Bureau), refers to contrast, foil, cold and heat, the substantial and the insubstantial, and so forth in artistic works and performances. Throughout the entire performance, Tujia nuo opera employs the artistic technique of "salty and bland complementing each other" to develop the story, arrange the plot structure, intensify contrast, and regulate the atmosphere. Take the plot development of Meng Jiangnü as an example. Episodes such as the official runners pursuing Fan Qiliang, the Parting at the East River, and Crying at the Great Wall stand in marked contrast of salty and bland with Juanzi Ximei (The Rolled-Scroll Play and the Younger Sister), Xianghui Chitang (Meeting by the Pond), and Baiwang Songniang (Seeing Mother Off at Baiwang).

4. Analysis of the Healing Mechanism from the Perspective of Arts Therapy

In the animistic stage of the formation of magical theory, the obstacles faced by the Tujia people in their survival were far greater than those in the modern era with advanced science and technology. Owing to survival problems, various anxieties arose, and driven by these anxieties, they put magical thought into practice. The most basic survival anxieties faced by humanity, such as illness and death, reproduction, and natural disasters, were important motivations for the emergence of Tujia nuo opera. Among these, reproduction and procreation was one of the anxieties particularly prominent in Tujia society. The very existence of the "Huan Bao'er Yuan" (fulfilling the vow for a child) ritual within the "Huan Yuan Nuo" (votive nuo) itself demonstrates the importance of reproductive issues in the minds of the Tujia people. In traditional agricultural society, offspring were not only the continuation of family bloodline but also an important source of labour. The notion that "of the three unfilial acts, the greatest is to have no heir" was equally deeply rooted in Tujia regions. For married couples, infertility was a tremendous disgrace and pressure, especially for women, who often faced reproach from parents-in-law, neglect from husbands, and even the fate of being divorced and abandoned. Even after bearing children, under harsh medical conditions, infant and child mortality rates were very high, and how to ensure the healthy growth of children constituted yet another layer of anxiety.

The British anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski pointed out in his book Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays that magic arises when human beings face uncertainty, anxiety and fear. He also pointed out that its function lies in satisfying the basic psychological needs of human beings, giving people confidence and hope [12]. As a kind of magical ritual drama, the Tujia nuo opera (exorcistic ritual drama) generates its healing function precisely on the basis of the transformative mechanism of magical thinking with respect to anxiety. Taking "Huan Bao'er Yuan" (Repaying the Vow for the Child) as an example, the following discussion will analyze in depth the principles and mechanisms of its healing from three aspects—the construction of sacred space, the guidance of musical experience, and the encouragement of narrative and performance. This will explore the multiple possibilities for the treatment of human physical and mental health.

4.1 Sacred Space: The Healing Field of Belief

The ritual is usually held at the home of the sponsor or at the location of the tima's (Tujia ritual specialist) nuo altar. In contrast to the sacred ritual, the place of everyday dwelling is profane, and in the process of transforming a profane place into a sacred one, the ritual practitioner has employed multiple means. The key to distinguishing sacred space from profane space lies in the "hierophany." The Romanian theologian Mircea Eliade used this term to express "the sacred thing revealing itself to the believer as proof of the sacred," which can be understood as the self-representation and core source of the sacredness of sacred space [13]. The hierophanies in the Tujia nuo altar mainly include two categories: divine images and ritual implements. The divine images in the inner hall and the outer courtyard represent the presence of the deities, while the ritual implements on the nuo altar table—such as the soldier tablets, conch shell, ritual knife, and Five Thunder Token—are the carriers of sacred power. As the base point, the hierophany breaks the homogeneity of space and endows profane space with sacred attributes. It enables believers to firmly believe that the deities will bestow upon humans here the power to change their circumstances.

These hierophanies, through visually referential suggestion, evoke an experiential resonance shared by a particular group, namely what Jung proposed as the "collective unconscious" [14]. The practice of the tima signing names on the deity statues on behalf of the believers is precisely an embodiment of Frazer's principle of sympathetic magic. Derived from the "law of similarity," the deity statue represents the deity's personal presence; according to the "law of contact," the tima signing on their behalf enables the deity to receive the message and bestow blessings upon the believers [15]. This magical thinking possesses significant healing meaning at the psychological level: when believers see their own names associated with the deity statue, they believe that a connection with the deity has been established. The intense effect of psychological suggestion activates inner resources and self-healing capacities, which is analogous in principle to modern suggestion therapy and hypnotherapy.

The American scholar Kong Qingshan points out that the necessary precondition for ritual therapy is based on being

"culture-dependent," that is, the patient individual's background culture [16]. Sacred space is meticulously designed according to "culture-dependent" principles; once the ritual begins, believers traverse from real space into historical and imagined space, and their reverence for the deities and collective belonging multiply, thereby temporarily forgetting real-world troubles and obtaining a sense of security and transcendence. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious further reveals that deity figures such as Nuogong and Nuomu, the Earth God, and the Changbing Changjiang (raging soldiers and raging generals) correspond respectively to the ancestor archetype, the wise old man archetype, the hero archetype, and other collective unconscious archetypes. When these

When the archetype is activated in the ritual, it generates a deep resonance with the believers at the unconscious level.

In addition, as an important carrier of Tujia culture, nuo opera bears historical memory and value concepts. Through joint participation in rituals, believers obtain a sense of ethnic belonging and identity, which plays an important role in alleviating individual loneliness and anxiety. The construction of sacred space provides the field foundation for the healing of nuo opera—secular rules are temporarily suspended, sacred order is established, and believers enter a "heterogeneous space" different from daily life, setting aside real-world pressures and obtaining religious experience and psychological relaxation.

4.2 Musical Experience: The Guidance and Transformation of Emotion

The performance of nuo opera is a multisensory experience combining the visual and the auditory, in which music guides the faithful into the therapeutic procedure through affective forms. The association between music and healing has a long history. In ancient China, the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon) already records that "the manifestations of the five zang organs can be inferred by analogy; the sounds corresponding to the five zang organs can be known through conscious awareness." This passage expounds the correspondence between the five tones and the qi dynamics of the five zang organs. In ancient Greece, Aristotle proposed the ISO principle (music synchronization principle), namely that music synchronized with the patient's current emotion elicits resonance, first venting negative emotions, then gradually guiding their transformation in a positive direction, and ultimately establishing positive cognition [17].

Many segments of nuo opera embody this principle. Consider the "Borrowing the Ground" segment. There, two tima (Tujia ritual specialists) fight each other with flags and swords, confronting and circling the arena, while the accompaniment of gongs, drums and ox horns grows increasingly intense along with the plot. This guides the audience from calm into a state of tension. At the climax they shout in encouragement, venting negative emotions under the dual stimulation of sound and sight; finally, when the ground is demarcated and the boundary established, the accompaniment shifts to the light, brisk melody of the bamboo flute, reinforcing inner positive strength. This strategy of first synchronising and then guiding is entirely consistent with the principles of modern music therapy—respecting the worshippers' current emotional state and establishing trust before providing guidance is more effective than directly instilling positive emotions.

Another important function of nuo opera music is to guide people into altered states of consciousness (ASC), characterized by diminished rational thinking, distorted sense of time, and heightened suggestibility. Helen Bonny, the founder of Guided Imagery and Music, holds that music is a facilitator of altered states of consciousness [18]. In nuo opera, instruments such as the sounding of the heavenly drum, gongs, large cymbals, ox horns, and conch shells — the clamorous sound of gongs and drums — can guide people into altered states of consciousness. In these states, perceptual thinking is enhanced, the constraints of time and space are cast off, and imagination and creativity become exceptionally active. This produces new understandings of things and creatively finds pathways to solve problems.

Listening to repetitive drumming is also a mode of healing. Bruno Gingras and others have demonstrated through research that listening to fifteen minutes of repetitive drumming or ritual meditation music is sufficient to induce a decrease in cortisol levels [19]. The sound of the gong, moreover, possesses the additional value of an unconditioned auditory stimulus, capable of eliciting relatively spontaneous subjective responses. The sounds of the ox horn and the conch are further

It is regarded as a medium for communicating with the divine; its distinctive timbre and rhythm resonate with Tujia beliefs, and under musical guidance people achieve the integration of body, mind, and spirit. From a biological standpoint, music can induce various physiological responses such as lowered blood pressure, stabilized breathing, and elevated skin temperature, activating the parasympathetic nervous system and reducing the level of physiological arousal, thereby improving the body's homeostasis and achieving physical and mental relaxation.

4.3 Narrative Performance: Spiritual Encouragement and Identity

The deeper meaning of narrative refers to the events that occur, the place, the characters, and the specific plot, as well as what significance the events hold for the individual. Through diverse artistic forms, nuo opera acts upon the audience's perceptual system, and cross-media narrative realizes the embodied experience of religious emotion.

The nuo opera within the "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) ritual revolves primarily around the experiences of the chief

deities of sacrifice, Nuogong and Nuomu. Among its segments, the "Opening the Altar" section forms a cross-media mimetic narrative at different levels of "music-dance-drama" through music, dialogue, and mimetic bodily movements. It takes the religious symbolic metaphors of the nuo ritual as its representation, visually dramatises mythological stories, and vividly reproduces the historical and cultural memory of "human origins." In the nuo opera, the "Precious Invocation of the Nuo Deities" chanted by the tima (Tujia ritual specialist) summarises the merits of Nuogong and Nuomu in creating the world and nurturing humanity, as well as their stories as protective deities. Through worshipping the nuo deities, the goals of driving out evil and dispelling calamity, and praying for blessings and auspiciousness, can be achieved. The believers are deeply convinced of this, and through the smooth conduct of the ritual they obtain comfort and encouragement.

The healing power of mythic narrative derives to a large extent from archetypal resonance. The myths of a group reflect the desires and needs of its members, endowing shared group experience with life meaning. Whenever they encounter life difficulties, the Tujia people perform in ritual the story of Nuogong and Nuomu creating the world and nurturing humanity and overcoming difficulties. The believers imagine that by means of the divine power of the nuo deities they overcome anxiety and tension, and within belonging and identification achieve projection, empathy, catharsis and sublimation. Narrative therapy theory holds that psychological problems often originate from life stories that are too thin, too negative, or suppressed by dominant narratives. Therapy is helping clients to re-narrate their life stories, discover positive elements, and endow them with new meaning.

The "Gou Yuan" (fulfilling the vow) segment, in comedic form, displays another healing function of narrative. The Italian religious scholar Theodor Gaster regarded ritual as a performance of myth, holding that ritual is the enactment of mythic narrative [20]. In "Gou Yuan," the tima respectively plays the Earth God and the Judge, engaging in improvised banter and buffoonery on site, teasing the presiding tima, which provokes uproarious laughter from the audience. In Tujia nuo opera, the targets of inserted comic banter and buffoonery are not limited to the performers themselves; audience members are also randomly selected for interactive joking and laughter.

Narrative is capable not only of providing spiritual encouragement, but also of helping people reconstruct their self-identity. When believers participate in

During the nuo opera ritual, they are not merely bystanders but also participants. They connect their own life stories with the mythological narratives in the nuo opera, reinterpreting their experiences within the framework of those mythological narratives, thereby achieving the reconstruction of self-identity. The ritual performance is in fact an enactment of mythological ideals, employing dramatic means to achieve the purpose of sacrificing to the deities, presenting the distinct characteristic of "ritual within drama, drama within ritual." During the performance, the performers offer people an inner, dynamic support in a humorous and witty manner. The will of the deities and sacred power permeate the entire performance, helping believers establish a self-healing mechanism. They obtain psychological, emotional, and affective release, comfort, and encouragement within the virtual sacred space where humans and deities coexist.

5. Conclusion

The "sacredness" of nuo opera is the characteristic factor that sustains its own vitality, and it is also the spiritual pillar for realizing reciprocity with believers. From the perspective of functional attributes, it is undoubtedly a process of "divine-human reciprocity"—a process of transition from the secular world to the sacred world, and then a return to the secular world. Through hierophanies with metaphorical functions, a "sacred space" of human-divine coexistence is constructed, and through rituals and performances of multiple visual and auditory dimensions, the healing function is ultimately realized. Tujia nuo opera narrates its own experience in a unique way, and hardship, repression, and pain are thereby released, the reason for which lies in the sacred reward function of nuo opera.

This article systematically explores the healing mechanism of Tujia nuo opera in Xiangxi from the perspective of arts therapy. It finds that the healing function is primarily realized through four dimensions. Survival anxiety acts as the generative motive and constitutes the psychological foundation of nuo opera healing. Sacred space provides the field basis, evoking a sense of security and belonging through sympathetic magic and the collective unconscious. Musical experience serves as the guiding mechanism, achieving emotional catharsis and transformation through the ISO principle, with repetitive drumbeats reducing cortisol levels. Narrative performance offers spiritual support, providing encouragement and cultural identity through archetypal narrative and comedic performance.

Modern people already have a completely new understanding of the nature of health: true health is the upward movement of one's state of existence, and the harmony of the psychological, emotional, social and spiritual. The performance, symbols and metaphors of "Huan Yuan Nuo" (Votive Nuo) demonstrate that these local knowledges has played a role among the people that Western medicine may not necessarily achieve, and constitutes an important supplement to the Western med-

ical system. Exploring its healing mechanism not only provides multiple pathways for the treatment of physical and mental health, but also provides a new direction for the protection and development of cultural heritage.

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