

# Zhaotong Nuo Mask Artistic Characteristics

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## Abstract

Zhaotong Nuo opera (昭通傩戏) is a kind of praying for the blessing of the gods, exorcise the evil spirits Nuo opera rituals. In recent years, due to social and environmental factors and the aging of practitioners and other factors, the development of Zhaotong Duangong opera is currently facing a standstill in the state, and even in the retreat to extinction. The research objective is: 1. To study the artistic characteristics of the Zhaotong Nuo masks. The research adopts qualitative research methodology, through in-depth Zhaotong to conduct fieldwork, interviews and centralized talks to the inheritors, performers and other ways to collect information. The study analyzes the artistic characteristics of Zhaotong Nuo masks by using the theories of aesthetics and semiotics, which include mask type, mask function, structure, facial features, color, material, and production process. By analyzing the artistic characteristics of the masks, it was found that fierce God Mask, righteous God Mask and popular figure mask have different stylistic characteristics, and the makers of the masks follow this norm when making the masks. The ultimate goal of the study is to enrich the knowledge system of Zhaotong Nuo culture, for potential scholars to study and protect the study of Zhaotong Nuo culture to provide assistance. This also provides more possibilities for the protection and continuation of marginal traditional culture in contemporary China.

**Keywords :** Zhaotong Nuo masks, Nuo culture, Artistic characteristic, Duan Gong opera, Zhaotong city

## Introduction

Nuo is a kind of ritual behavior to invite the gods to drive away ghosts, pray for blessings and eliminate harm. As a special folk art culture handed down from ancient times, it is still active in some parts of China. The term Nuo is believed to have evolved from primitive hunting, and with the development of society, evolved into the early rituals used to exorcise epidemics (Zhang, Y.K., 2012).

As a branch of Yunnan Nuo culture, Zhaotong is in Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan junction. Therefore, the Zhaotong area of Nuo culture is the product of local Nuo and foreign military Nuo fusion. According to the records, this situation was formed in the Ming and Qing Dynasties in Jiangxi,

Sichuan and Hubei and Guangdong Duan Opera. (Zhang, Y.N. & Xu, Y., 2016) As the Nuo opera activities in Zhaotong are conducted under the auspices of Duangong, so the Nuo opera in Zhaotong is also known as "Duangong opera". Duangong opera is distributed in the remote mountainous areas of nine counties and cities in the Zhaotong region, including Zhenxiong, Yiliang, Weixin, Daguan, Yanjin, Suijiang, Yongshan, Qiaojia, and Zhaotong etc. The Suijiang County Records of 1930 recorded that Duangong opera has programs such as "Playing Nuo, Qing Tan, Rewarding the Gods, Driving away Ghosts, Jiang Qi, Zou Yin, Guan Gong, and Shao Tai" (Gu, P.G., 1996).



*Figure 1 Zhaotong Geographic Location*

Zhaotong Nuo opera generally "Tanmen" organization form of activities, the organization is about dozens of people, the leader is called Duangong. Zhaotong area more famous Duangong organization, the origin of the earliest Duangong from Guangxi Zou family, according to the "Zou genealogy" records, Zou family ancestors in the Ming Dynasty Hongwu eighteen years (1385) for the propaganda of Buddhism and Taoism to Mang Department of the House (today's Zhenxiong County) to reside, along the line of succession so far there have been 21 generations (Li, H.P., 2012). Masks preserved a large number and more intact Wang's family as well as Deng's family, these families have served as Duangong's ancestors, for others to organize Nuo rituals for a living. However, due to the different origins and genres, there are "Buddhist" and "Taoist", this is because the Zhaotong region of Nuo opera is in the religious culture of the soil to grow up in the process of growth by Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other religious and cultural ideas, which is largely due to the folk beliefs for Nuo opera fit. It can also be said that Nuo opera is the art of religious rituals, this artistic process is the use of symbolism, the intangible things tangible, some abstract ideas and beliefs embodied, Nuo

opera mask is to comply with this demand, as a carrier, in religious rituals symbolize the gods, become an important tool to communicate between man and God. But in fact, whether it is "Taoism" or "Buddhism", most of them are also witchdoctrines, very few people believe in pure Taoism or Buddhism. The religious activities of Tanmen are divided into two categories: the "yin-tan" and the "yang-tan": the "yin-tan" refers to funerary rituals; the "yang-tan" refers to prayers and wishes (Gu, P.G. 1998).

Nuo masks as Nuo festival and Nuo opera development and evolution of the companion, throughout the Nuo opera performance activities, is an indispensable prop in all ritual activities. Zhaotong Duangong's special title for the mask is called "face", also known as "ancient face" (Wang, L., 2014). This kind of opera sacrifice is a special form of expression in the transitional stage from sacrifice to opera, centering on the expression of God. These masks represent various gods. there are as many masks as there are gods. the sorcerers wear the masks and become the incarnation of the gods. including the knives and sticks and other objects in their hands. which become magical instruments with divine power (Li. F.J., 2003).

After the establishment of new China, Duangong opera masks were destroyed due to the "Cultural Revolution" in the "Four Olds". Therefore, in the later Nuo opera performances, some Duangong can only use paper masks or direct makeup on the face instead of masks (He, C., 1994). Currently in Zhaotong City Government and the joint efforts of relevant personnel, Zhaotong City has found a large number of Nuo masks, these masks are beautifully carved, unique shape, ancient and hideous, is China's best folk arts and crafts. At the same time, with China's emphasis on culture, Yunnan Nuo opera masks are regarded as precious national intangible cultural heritage (Hu, Z.G. & Wang, Y., 2017). The state has also introduced corresponding protection and inheritance measures. on March 28, 2013, the government of yunnan province passed the "yunnan province intangible cultural heritage protection regulations".

In recent years, with the attention of the state and the development of the Internet, Nuo masks once again appeared in people's vision. At present, the study of China's Nuo mask is mainly from the perspective of anthropology and opera, and only part of its artistic part of the analysis. Nuo mask art as an independent

research object, from the mask itself, analyze and study its inherent aesthetic characteristics, which is relatively rare in China. Zhaotong area of Nuo mask is the fusion of provincial military Nuo and township Nuo, which represents the intersection of marginal Nuo culture and mainstream Nuo culture, but its production process, modeling and coloring have retained certain local elements. Due to historical reasons, its material materials have been seriously damaged, so the study of Nuo masks in Zhaotong region is very necessary.

This study uses aesthetic theory and semiotic theory to analyze the artistic characteristics of Zhaotong Nuo masks, including Zhaotong Nuo masks type, function, structure, facial features, color, material, production process. The ultimate goal of the study is to enrich the knowledge system of Zhaotong Nuo culture, for potential scholars to study and protect the study of Zhaotong Nuo culture to provide assistance. This also provides more possibilities for the protection and continuation of marginal traditional culture in contemporary China.

## Research Objectives

To study the artistic characteristics of the Zhaotong Nuo masks.

## Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research and collects relevant information through questionnaires, fieldwork, interviews, focus group discussions and other methods. On this basis, the artistic characteristics of Zhaotong Nuo masks in Yunnan are analyzed. The research steps are as follows:

1. Collect relevant information about Zhaotong Nuo masks, Zhaotong Nuo opera, and field visits to the existing situation of Nuo masks in Zhaotong area, as well as visiting the inheritors of Zhaotong Nuo opera, to provide adequate support for the study.
2. The target group consists of the following people, namely, key informants (KI): Zhaotong Nuo cultural heritage inheritors and mask makers, Mr. Long Xuezhi, Mr. Shen Kaifa, Mr. Zou Yongfu, Mr. Zou Yonggui, a total of four; casual informants (CI): performers of Zhaotong Nuo opera, a

total of two; general informants (GI): local residents, mask collectors, a total of five.

3. Research tools include observation and interviews. Reference to relevant literature to provide clearer ideas and theoretical support for the study. Observations and interviews with KI, CI and GI were conducted to obtain information on the type, function, structure, facial features, color, material, production process.

4. Data collection was organized in two stages:

- 4.1 Collection of secondary information from relevant literature, articles, studies and other sources to establish a knowledge framework.

- 4.2 Data were collected through observations and interviews during the fieldwork.

5. Data were analyzed using content analysis and the results were presented in the form of descriptive analysis.

## Results

Nuo masks play an important role in Duangong opera performances, Duangong wearing a mask, it became the embodiment of God, the mask is an important prop connecting the gods and people. Producers in the creation of masks, into its unique aesthetic vision, although not exquisite, there is no academy carving techniques, but this is precisely the achievement of Zhaotong Nuo mask art. The author collected a total of 58 masks, according to the different owners of the mask, will be divided into: Wang's

Duangong mask, Deng's Duangong mask, Zou's Duangong masks, as well as the owner of the mask is unknown. Through the study and analysis of Zhaotong Nuo masks of the external form and internal meaning, the Zhaotong Nuo masks of artistic characteristics are divided into: type, function, structure, facial features, color, material, production process. Through the analysis of these artistic characteristics, found the creation of Zhaotong Nuo mask law.

### 1.Type

Mr. Gu Puguang in the "history of Chinese masks" book on the many kinds of masks for scientific classification, the common classification method is from the structure of the mask, the mask material, the mask shape, the mask function and other aspects of classification. According to Zhaotong Nuo mask in the Duangong opera in the role of background, character traits, the author will Zhaotong Nuo mask is divided into:

**Fierce God Masks:** These are mainly masks of deities with hideous faces that give a strong deterrent effect. Many of these masks are evolutions or

deformations of ferocious gods and animals, and their origin may be the early worship of fierce animals by human beings, especially in response to epidemics and the need for a powerful god to drive away evil spirits. And represents the ruthless, Fierce God and deterrent mask image is undoubtedly the most effective, so the mask with the image of Fierce God in Zhaotong Nuo culture occupies an important position. Especially in the story script occupies an important position, especially in the ancient period. Fierce God mask has been an important position since ancient times. Duangong opera in

Zhaotong, in line with the characteristics of the fierce god masks: Chi, Wang Lingguan, eight barbarians, Chuanzhu, Taoshan King, Guo Sanlang, Kuixing, Sinlong, the seven generals, Erlang Shen and so on, a total of 21.

**Righteous God Masks:** Righteous God Masks mainly refer to good, righteous, benevolent and gentle gods. Most of these gods have kind brows and smiles, and their images are very anthropomorphic, resembling the respected elders and upright youths of everyday life. The image of these gods is very close to people's daily life and accepted by people, but the status is not as high as Fierce God, mainly because these gods appeared later than Fierce God, and began to develop from the Sui and Tang dynasties until the Ming Dynasty when they flourished into a system, and their functionality is not as obvious as that of Fierce God. Representatives of these character masks include the Land God, the God of Longevity, the Monkey King, and the Old Man of Xuanhuang, totaling 11.

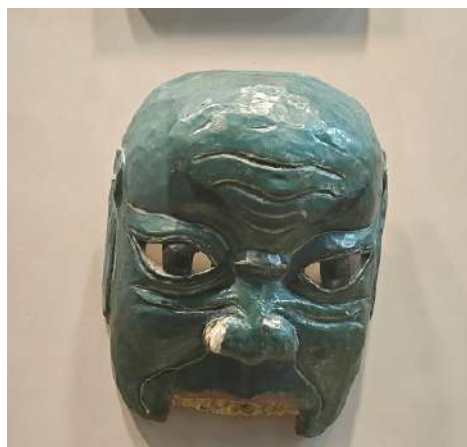
**Popular figure masks:** mainly refers to some popular figures, hero image evolved from the role, mostly for the daily figure of the facial image of the realistic, popular figure roles are generally divided into two kinds, respectively, positive role and clown role, positive role generally refers to the role of upright, generous Popular figure, facial features are more realistic. The representative masks are Mei Niangchai, Master Zhang, Master Li, Big Apprentice, Miao Laosan, Meixiang, etc. The other type of clown masks, on the basis of realism, add exaggerated changes in expression, or crying or laughing, highly entertaining. The representative characters are Chou Niang Chai, Xiao Jin Cai and so on. Popular figure masks total 26. Through (Table 1) we can see that Wang's Duangong masks have the most balanced composition of figures, while Zou's and Deng's Duangong masks have a smaller number of Righteous God masks, and among the other masks, there are no Righteous God masks to be found, and most of them are Popular figure masks.



*Figure 2 Fierce God Mask*

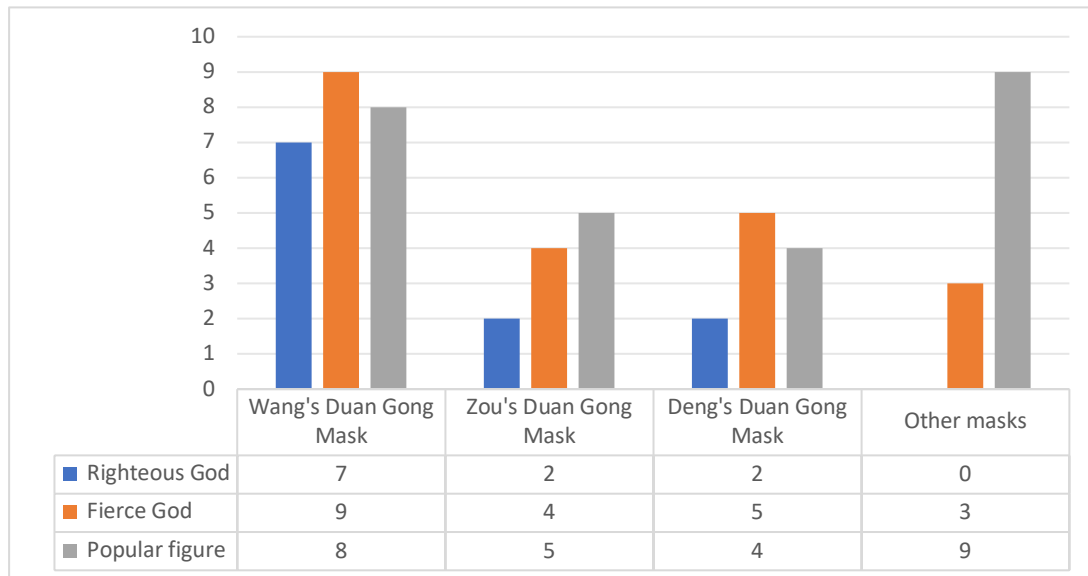


*Figure 3 Righteous God Mask*



*Figure 4 Popular figure mask*



**Table 1** Zhaotong Duan Gong Opera Mask Character Type Bar Chart

*Different types of Zhaotong Nuo masks, including 11 righteous God Masks, 21 fierce God Masks, 26 popular figure masks*

## 2. Functions

Each type of mask will have a corresponding function point, Fierce God masks, Righteous God masks and Popular figure masks correspond to different functions, namely, expulsion-type masks, pacifying-type masks and entertainment-type masks.

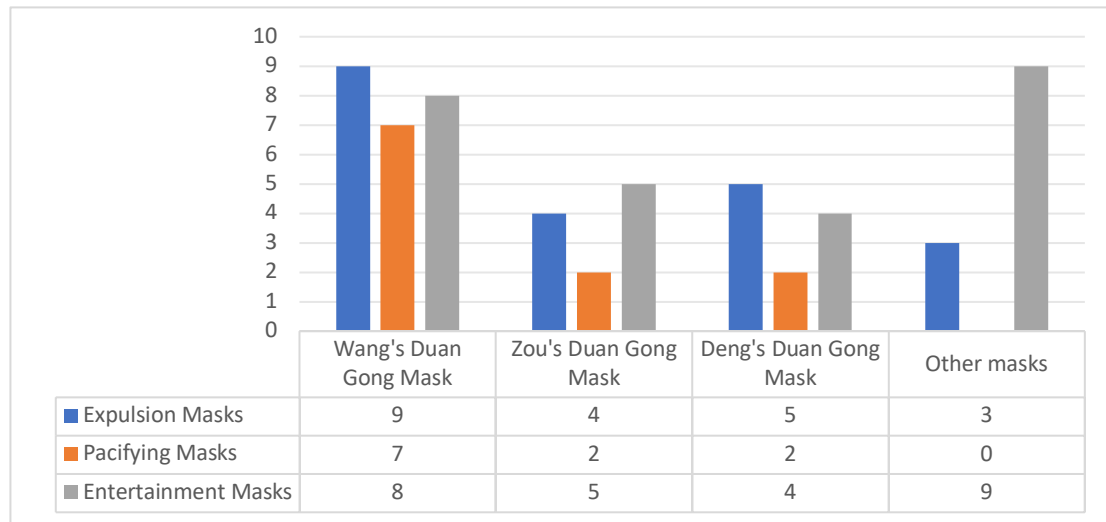
Expulsion masks: mainly used to suppress demons and expel ghosts, remove the plague, these masks are generally characterized by the image of the Fierce God's face, in order to play a deterrent, expel ghosts and epidemics.

Pacifying masks: mainly used to pacify the public mood, seek some

psychological comfort, give some kind of good wishes masks, generally seeking children, seeking longevity, seeking wealth, seeking peace, seeking family and all things are often used in this kind of masks to carry out ritual activities.

Entertainment masks: mainly for entertainment masks, these masks usually appear in the local Duangong opera juggling, interspersed in the Duangong opera throughout the ritual activities to enliven the ritual atmosphere.

Table 2 Zhaotong Duan Gong Opera Mask Functions Bar



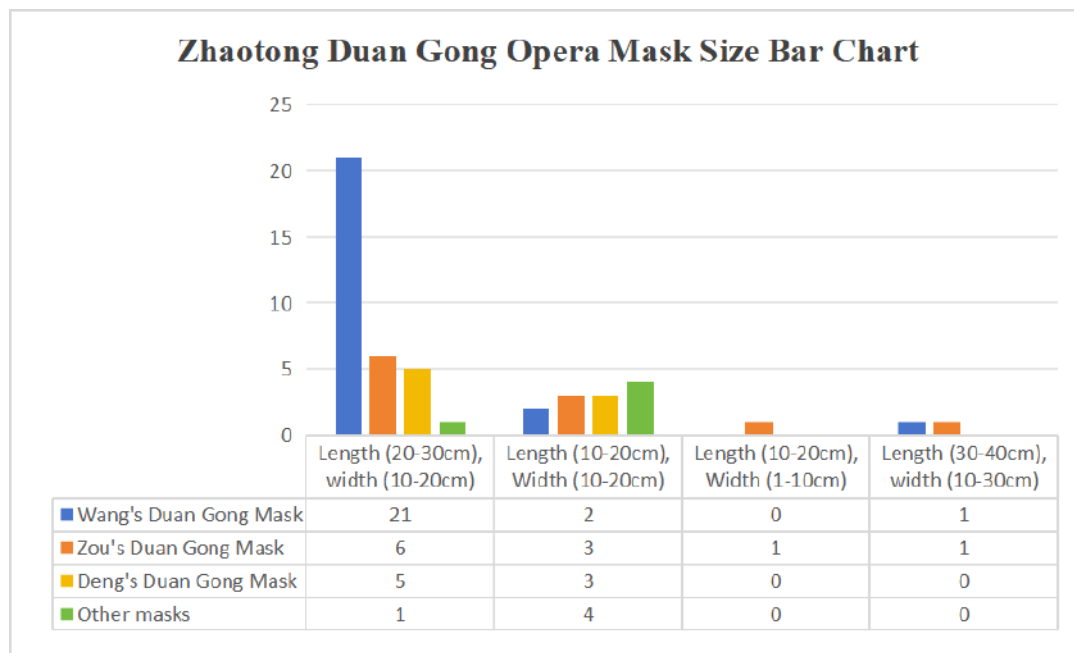
*Different functions of Zhaotong Nuo masks, including 11 righteous God Masks, 21 fierce God Masks, 26 popular figure masks*

### 3. Structure

Zhaotong region of Nuo masks, relative to other areas of Nuo masks, its size and structure has more obvious characteristics. In terms of size, Zhaotong Nuo masks relative to other areas of Nuo masks smaller size, generally no more than 30 centimeters long, no more than 20 centimeters wide. The region's masks are generally this size, which are mainly some deity masks. Such as: sin dragon, Kuixing, Sun Wukong, Wang Lingguan and so on. The other type of masks are smaller masks,

between 20 centimeters and 10 centimeters in length and width, mainly Popular figure masks, such as: Meixiang, monks, Miao Laosan, female statues and so on. There are also special size masks, such as Zhenxiong County, Hengdi Township, Bailuo Village, Zou's Duangong's Erlang Shen mask, 32 cm long, 15.5 cm wide, is the largest Duangong opera masks throughout Zhaotong. Duangong Zou's seven generals mask length 14.5 centimeters, width only 9.5 centimeters.

Table 3 Zhaotong Duan Gong Opera Mask Size Bar Chart

*Different sizes of Zhaotong Nuo masks*

Structurally, Zhaotong region's masks are mainly divided into full-face masks, broken jaw masks, hanging jaw masks, and half masks. Full-face mask is the most common form of Nuo masks in Zhaotong region, with complete facial features, Broken jaw mask and hanging jaw mask refers to no jaw and the jaw is connected to the structure of the mask role, mainly

#### 4. Facial features

Through the Zhaotong Nuo mask eyes, nose, mouth for separate analysis, I found that the Zhaotong mask role of the creation of the eyes has some fixed rules of creation. Zhaotong Duangong opera masks are often modeled differently due

for the role of Fierce God only appear mask structure. Half mask is a mask structure that generally contains only the portion of the mask from the tip of the nose upwards, and this structure masks are not abundant in this region, with only the mask of the character of the General of the Seven Surnames being of this characterization.

to different roles. Its expression is mainly based on the eyes, nose, mouth changes to shape different character traits, experience, identity, age and other image shaping.

Zhaotong Nuo masks in the overall characteristics of the obvious differences, can be roughly divided into three types, one is the angular type. Whether eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, cheekbones, teeth are more exaggerated and prominent, many Fierce God mask types are so, in order to highlight the role of the "ferocious", "ruthless", the expression of the method in the basis of realism pay more attention to strengthening the main body of the exaggerated, deformed features.

The second type is the outline flat shape. Both the undulation of the five senses is small, the outline line is flat, and its type is mainly realistic, exaggerated as a supplement, on the basis of realistic style, highlighting the character's gender, age, identity and other characteristics. Generally speaking, the face is full, the forehead is square, the eyebrows and eyes are stretched, the corners of the mouth are slightly curved, and the expression is amiable, which is the image of a good person who is calm and kind. Bodhisattva types such as the Landlord, with kind brows, steady eyes and a smile, show the image of a kind and amiable old man. Female characters such as Qiuxiang and Dagū, with coiled hair, curved eyebrows,

single phoenix eyes slightly closed, and slightly upturned corners of the mouth, resemble the image of women in life, and the overall type tends to be programmed, highlighting the "goodness" and "beauty" of female characters.

The third type is the deformation and exaggeration type, this type is mainly the use of asymmetrical techniques, breaking the symmetry of the mask, exaggerating the features of the mask, distorting and to the face. This method is generally used in the portrayal of clown masks, thus conveying a witty, humorous and comical image of comedic characters. The clown mask highlights the modeling of certain five senses, exaggerates and deforms them to make the clown's features more obvious, which can instantly catch the audience's eyeballs, thus drawing the distance between the work and the audience closer.

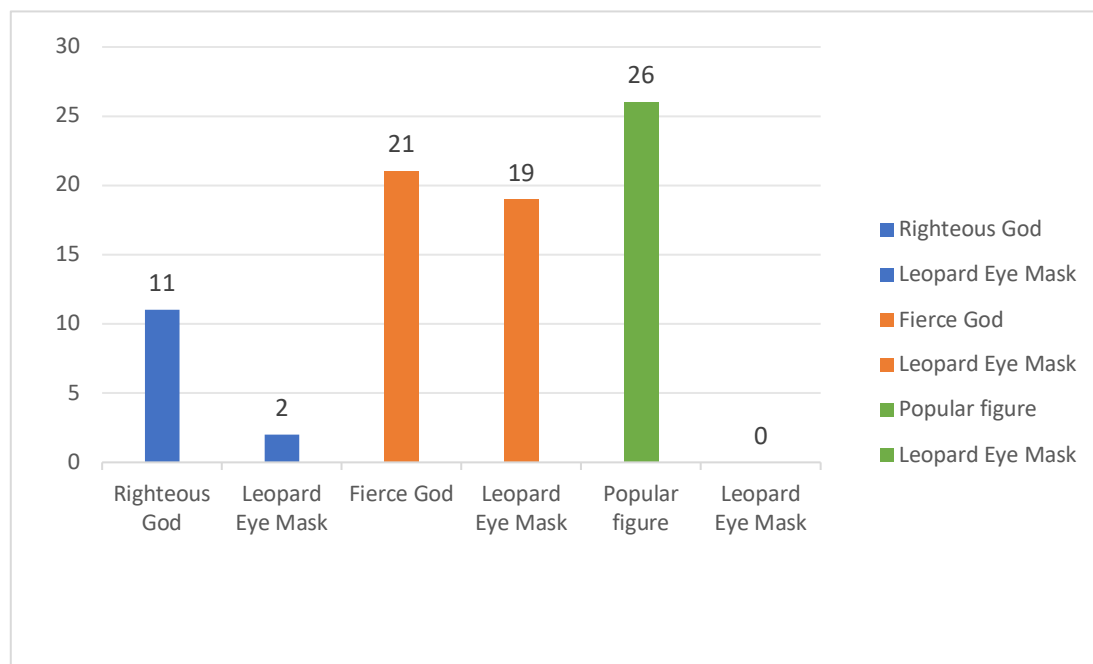
Zhaotong Nuo mask in addition to the overall composition of the above differences, there are also differences in personality. Mainly because of playing different roles, their eyes, nose and mouth have different modeling characteristics.

#### 4.1 Eyes

Zhaotong Nuo masks mainly rely on the upper and lower eyelids, corner of the eye upturned, downturned, pupil and eye size changes to form a variety of different shapes and reveal the character traits. According to Zhaotong Nuo masks of different eye structure, the mask's eyes are divided into leopard eyes, phoenix eyes, smiling eyes, three white eyes of four types.

Leopard eyes are characterized by large, round eyes, and protruding eye sockets. In total, there are 21 masks possessing leopard eyes, of which 19 are Fierce God masks and 2 are Righteous God masks. This indicates that the leopard eye shape is a typical feature of the Fierce God in Duangong opera in Zhaotong, and it is also a common means for mask makers to shape the Fierce God masks.

**Table 3** Number of Leopard Eye Stylized Masks in Duangong opera masks



*There are 21 Zhaotong Nuo masks with leopard eye features, including 2 righteous God Masks and 19 fierce God Masks.*

Phoenix eyes are eyes that are long and thin with upturned tails. Among the 58 masks, there are 19 masks with the phoenix eye feature, including 4 Righteous God masks and 15 Popular figure masks. This

indicates that the phoenix eye shape is mainly used in secular masks and not in Fierce God masks.

Smiling eyes refer to the eye structure in which the eyes are slightly

closed, the corners of the eyes are drooping, and the masked figure is smiling. Among the 58 masks, there are 14 masks with smiling eyes. Thirteen of them are masks of Popular figures, therefore, the smiling eyes masks are more widely used in the roles of Popular figures, and such styling is also more in line with the characteristics and needs of Duangong opera performances. The three white eyes refer to the eye features that the eyeballs are especially small and positioned in the lower part of the eye. Among all the masks, only the masks of Xuan Huang Lao Zu of Wang's Duangong and the mask of the Land Duke of Duangong of Deng's Duangong adopt the shape of three white eyes.

#### 4.2 Nose

Nose is one of the five senses, not only is the entrance to the body's breathing, but also its size, height, width, skewed will affect the beauty of the character. According to the classification of the nose type, Zhaotong Nuo masks most of the garlic nose, garlic nose refers to the shape of the nose such as garlic, low nose, the nose is particularly large, like three cloves of garlic. A total of 40 such masks. Crooked nose masks a total of 6, are clowns with, their noses around the wrong, to show the characters funny image. There

are 4 pointed-nose masks, of which the popular character Qiuxiang is the most typical, with a slender and straight nose, a slightly pointed nose, and a small nose, which fully reflects her softness and beauty as a female character.

For the remaining 10 masks, some have flared nostrils and some have flattened noses. By analyzing and comparing the types of mask noses and character types, it was found that crooked noses were only used in clown masks. There is no fixed scheme for the noses of the other masks, and the shapes of the noses are decided by the mask makers.

#### 4.3 Mouth

Of the 58 masks collected by the author, 32 masks have complete mouth structures and solid figures, including 10 Fierce God masks, 7 Righteous God masks, and 15 popular figure masks. The largest number of masks, 15, have large open mouths. Of these 15 masks, all of them depict gods, including 10 Fierce God masks and 5 Righteous God masks. There are 9 masks with closed mouths. 7 of the 9 masks are of popular figures and 2 are of Righteous God. There are 5 masks with twisted mouths, all of which are popular figures. There are 3 masks with slightly

open mouths, all of which are popular figures.

## 5. Color

Zhaotong Nuo mask color is usually relatively single, most masks only use one or two colors. There are also a small number of masks with rich colors, and the mask makers will follow certain norms and symbols when applying colors. Overall, there are significant differences in the way masks are colored in Zhaotong, which can be divided into four main types.

The first is to brush on a dark brown or light brown color, and then apply tung oil, so that the entire mask presents a single color setting, this color scheme is the most common.

The second is to apply skin tones first, then color on the face, nose, and parts of the headdress, sometimes using line outlines in some areas, and finally applying tung oil, which is usually found in some of the higher-ranking masked characters, especially the god masks.

## 6. Material

Zhaotong Nuo masks are mainly divided into wooden and paper, of which wooden accounted for the vast majority. Zou family and the Wang family Duangong

The third way is to use the heavy color method, using rich browns, flesh tones, reds, yellows, blacks and other colors to draw, choosing colors with a high degree of saturation, this method is mainly used to differentiate between the character's personality and function of the masks, in order to use the color to highlight the characteristics of the character.

The last way is to keep the original color of the wood, that is, without any coloring treatment, to keep the natural color of the wood.

These four different ways of coloring show the rich and varied use of color in the production of masks of Duangong opera in Zhaotong, which provides a variety of choices for the image shaping of masks and the presentation of character features, and enriches the forms of expression of mask art.

masks used in the wood are carved with Dinwood, Dinwood light weight, fine and smooth texture, easy to carve, easy to use, it is easy to make long-term preservation of

the mask is a good wood. Duang's Duangong mask materials for poplar and willow, and mainly willow-based, although the willow is relatively hard and heavy, but willow has been regarded as the role of the wood to ward off evil spirits, so it is not surprising to be selected as the material for the production of masks, but this will bring a great impact on the production of the later period, due to the lack of wood heavy enough not enough to float, the difficulty of carving up the carving is very difficult, so carving technology is relatively simple, which determines the carved This determines that the carved masks are generally characterized by a single, rough shape.

The paper masks, on the other hand, appeared to replace the broken as well as lost wooden masks. Because in the 1960s, initiated by the Chinese government in the "Four Olds" campaign, through the Duangong opera suffered heavy damage, many valuable masks have been destroyed, the traditional production process has been lost, coupled with the life of wooden masks is not long, in the use of the process of avoiding loss, so the number of wooden masks is becoming less and less. The loss of wooden masks so that Duangong in Nuo opera performance had to take a compromise approach, they use paper masks instead of traditional wooden Nuo masks

**Table 4** *Mask Materials*

Material	Merit	Drawback
Ding Wood	The material is lightweight and has smooth textures, which is easy to carve and easy to use	Raw materials are not readily available
Poplar	Good toughness, light weight, easy to process	Easy to deform, easy to grow insects
Willow wood	Fine texture, easy to dry, aging resistance, more stable, good performance	Not easy to process

*Advantages and disadvantages of different woods*



## 7. Production process:

The production of Zhaotong Duangong opera masks is generally divided into five parts: wood selection - preliminary processing - carving - coloring - decoration. Next carve the five senses. Then with coloring, the Duangong opera figure is painted; finally, the beard and other decorations are fitted. There are also some Fierce God masks that are made into hanging jaw masks, and the general production method is to separate the upper and lower jaws during carving, then drill holes in the edges and connect them with a rope. Hanging jaw part can be stored separately from the main body of the mask, become movable part, and then use the rope to connect it with the mask during the performance, manipulate the rope with the mouth, the jaw will be opened and closed up and down, resulting in a sense of movement, increasing the fun and flexibility of the mask. There are two ways to make paper masks. One is to do a good job of clay mold, and then covered with crushed cotton paper on the clay mold, to be dry, remove the trimming, and then color. Another is to use the same method, directly on the wooden mask on the cotton

paper paste, to be dry and then removed, slightly trimmed and then colored.

After the mask is processed, it is still just an ordinary object, and does not have the function of psychic. In order for the mask to have psychic functions, a ceremony must be held: Duangong recites the corresponding words, sprinkles wine on the mask, selects a rooster, pinches the crown, plucks off the feathers, dips them in the blood on the crown, and applies them to the forehead of the mask. Rooster on behalf of the morning, in the Taoist twenty-eight star system in the chicken on behalf of the sun, is considered to be a heavier yang poultry; and the cock blood to exorcise the devil, but also to a certain extent reflects the exorcism culture and the origins of the traditional Chinese sacrificial culture and Taoist culture.

## Conclusion and Discussion

### 1. Conclusion

In Zhaotong Nuo mask art modeling or rough and bold, or delicate and soft, or absurd, or abstract appearance, hidden under the law of creation. Mask makers will be based on the type of mask, different functions, using different modeling styles. When making Fierce God masks, the eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, cheekbones, teeth and other types are all exaggerated and prominent, such as "leopard eyes" and "wide-open mouth", which are exclusive to Fierce God masks, and through the exaggerated treatment of facial features and deformation, highlighting the character's "character". Through the exaggerated treatment and distortion of facial features, the character's "ferocity" and "majesty" are emphasized.

When making Righteous God masks, the five features are less undulating and the contour lines are gentle, and their type is mainly realistic, supplemented by exaggeration, highlighting the character's gender, age, identity and other characteristics on the basis of the realistic style. When showing the elderly gods again, they have kind brows, steady eyes and smiles, while using horse hair to add beard

details to show the image of a kind and amiable old man.

When making masks of Popular figures, there are two main ways of modeling, one is based on realism, for example, when showing female figures, the hair is coiled up, the eyebrows are curved, the single phoenix eye is slightly closed, and the corner of the mouth is slightly upturned, which is just like the image of a woman in her life, and the overall type tends to be programmed to emphasize the "goodness" and "beauty" of the female figure. The other type uses asymmetrical techniques to shape clown masks, where the maker breaks the symmetrical and balanced composition of the mask, distorting and generalizing the face. This method is all used in the portrayal of clown masks, thus conveying a witty, humorous and comical image of comedic characters. Zhaotong Nuo opera as an ancient traditional folk culture expression, once widely active in the whole Zhaotong city, but nowadays Duan Gong opera is facing the crisis of loss and disappearance. One of the changes in the social environment is considered to be one of the important

reasons leading to the decline of Zhaotong Duangong opera. Especially during the Cultural Revolution, Zhaotong Duangong Opera was regarded as crooked and evil and was seriously damaged. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the situation of Duan Gong Opera gradually improved, but with the development of society, the situation began to change. With the popularization of education and the improvement of Zhaotong people's daily living conditions, people no longer need to rely on Duan Gong Opera to pray for the blessing of the gods as they did before. As a result, people's demand for and recognition of this traditional culture gradually weakened. According to the visits to the local villagers in Zhaotong, there are still Duan Gong in all the towns and villages below Zhaotong City, but most of them

have not mastered the complete Duan Gong skills and only know how to do some simple rituals. With the selection of Zhaotong Duan Gong Opera as a national intangible cultural heritage in June 2021, and a series of government policies to protect the traditional culture of Duan Gong Opera, Zhaotong Duan Gong Opera has come back to people's view. This paper analyzes it from the point of view of artistic characteristics, and improves the Zhaotong Nuo cultural knowledge system. Better explore Zhaotong Nuo opera, will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the study of cultural history, folklore, theater history. It also provides more possibilities for the protection and continuation of marginal traditional culture in contemporary China.

## 2. Discussion

According to aesthetic theory, Zhaotong Nuo masks of artistic charm and aesthetic value embodied in its structure, color, material and production process of the 4 basic elements of the mutual integration and coordination. These elements not only constitute the material basis of Zhaotong Nuo mask, but also its aesthetic effect to show the key. Structure,

mask makers according to different mask role type, according to personal aesthetics and comply with certain creative rules, to ensure that the mask its functionality and symbolism in Nuo rituals. Color, different colors in the mask is not only visual decoration, but also contains deep cultural symbols and emotional expression. Color collocation and contrast makes each

Zhaotong Nuo masks are angry and expressive, can visually strengthen the solemnity of the mask of the god figure masks and popular figure masks of the opera. Material, the different materials also directly affect the mask's expressive power. Zhaotong Nuo masks are usually made of wood, such as willow, dingwood and poplar. These woods in Zhaotong is considered to have the function of driving away evil spirits of the god wood, but also has the characteristics of carving and easy to obtain. Production process, Zhaotong Nuo masks are mainly divided into the selection of materials - primary processing - carving - color - decoration of five parts. Mask carving techniques and meticulous manual processing, so that each Nuo mask has become a unique work of art. It is in the perfect combination of these elements, Zhaotong Nuo masks show extremely vivid image and rich connotation. Whether it is through the theatrical form of performance and ritual related to the plot content, or to the way the city farce to entertain the gods and people, Zhaotong Nuo masks are able to traditional culture and mysterious, magical color into one, so that the performance is full of intriguing charm.

Saussure believes that the essence of the symbol lies in the relationship

between the reference and the reference. Symbols do not naturally have meaning, but because of social habits or conventions, a connection is established between the referent and the signifier. Therefore, symbols are perceptual forms used to carry meaning, and they are tools for expressing and conveying meaning through language or other sign systems. He also emphasized the arbitrariness of symbols, i.e., the relationship between the energetic and the referential is not natural, but is socially agreed upon. Therefore, the purpose of symbols is to express meaning. In Zhaotong Nuo masks, behind each Nuo masks originated from religious mythological stories or local myths and legends, mask makers according to the plot of the story and the characters, while following a certain law of creation, to create a righteous God Mask, fierce God Mask and popular figure masks. This paper is based on the analysis of the artistic characteristics of Zhaotong Nuo masks, from the type, function, structure, facial features, color, material, production process of Zhaotong Nuo masks, enriching the Zhaotong Nuo cultural knowledge system, for scholars with the potential to study and protect Zhaotong Nuo culture to provide assistance.

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