

Embodied Practice and Field Interweaving in the Qilin Baima Dance of Zhaoqing, Lingnan

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Abstract: The Qilin Baima Dance is a folk dance form in Fengkai County, Zhaoqing, Lingnan, organized around the local narrative of Mo Xuanqing, the first zhuangyuan, or top-ranked imperial examination scholar, associated with Lingnan. Its performance mobilizes a composite set of media, including the qilin, the white horse, the ceremonial gate, parasols, lanterns, mountain songs, and percussion. Through the embodied techniques of riding, passing through the gate, interweaving movement, procession, and singing, it transforms the local memory of scholarly success and honored return into an embodied practice situated within village festivals. Drawing on theories of embodied practice, field-habitus, and collective memory, this article moves beyond treating the dance as a static intangible cultural heritage text. Instead, it examines the generative logic of the Qilin Baima Dance through bodily memory, spatial order, ritual relationships, and symbolic meaning. The study argues that its embodied practice emerges from the interaction among the landscape of the Lingnan borderland, village ritual organization, and zhuangyuan cultural belief. Its contemporary transmission therefore requires a relational reconstruction among body, field, and community, so that living continuity and aesthetic transformation can be achieved while preserving its core bodily mechanisms.

Keywords: Qilin Baima Dance, Embodied Practice, Field, Lingnan Traditional Dance.

1. Introduction

Folk dance does not exist merely as a configuration of movements. It also preserves local history, ritual order, and collective affect through bodily performance. For traditional dances transmitted primarily through oral instruction and bodily imitation, the body is both a medium of technical learning and a site where social memory is sedimented and re-enacted^[1]. Mauss's discussion of "techniques of the body" suggests that the body is not a passive natural organism, but a technical object shaped by society, disciplined by culture, and continuously generated through practice^[2]. Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus further demonstrates that bodily dispositions are formed within specific social spaces; they carry previous experience while responding to the structures of the present field^[3].

From the perspective of social memory, many local cultural forms are not preserved solely through written records. Rather, they are transmitted through festivals, rituals, songs, dances, and everyday forms of performance. Connerton argues that one crucial mode of transmitting social memory is embodied practice, that is, a stable mnemonic mechanism formed through bodily postures, ordered movements, and performative contexts^[4]. Halbwachs's theory of collective memory also reminds us that group memory is always reorganized within concrete spaces, social relations, and symbolic media^[5]. Accordingly, if the study of traditional dance remains limited to the naming of movements or the description of stage forms, it will be unable to reveal the deeper relationships between bodily experience and local social structure.

The Qilin Baima Dance is transmitted in Fengkai County, Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province, and is a traditional dance with a distinctive zhuangyuan cultural connotation. Its narrative core points to the local memory of Mo Xuanqing, a scholar associated with the Tang dynasty and remembered in the locality as the first zhuangyuan of Lingnan. Its

performative form is mediated by the qilin, the white horse, the ceremonial gate, parasols, lanterns, percussion, and local mountain songs. Through riding, passing through the gate, turning, interweaving movement, and singing, performers convert the narrative sequence of "success in the imperial examination-honored return home-village celebration" into a bodily text that can be watched, participated in, and repeatedly enacted. This article does not focus on chronological verification. Instead, it takes embodied practice and field interweaving as its analytical path, examining how the bodily form of the Qilin Baima Dance is generated through the combined action of the Lingnan landscape, village ritual life, and zhuangyuan belief.

2. Bodily Memory and the Formation of Technique in Folk Performance

The technique of the Qilin Baima Dance is not generated simply through the transmission of standardized movement patterns. Rather, it gradually forms bodily memory through festival performance, prop manipulation, song accompaniment, and village spectatorship. In this process, the performer's body does more than execute movement. It also carries local narrative, ritual order, and collective identity, thereby providing a crucial entry point for understanding the production of folk dance knowledge.

2.1. The Body as a Medium for Storing Folk Dance Knowledge

Embodied practice emphasizes that dance is not an external scheme of movement imposed upon the body. It is an experiential structure accumulated through repeated training and situated performance. In folk dance, the ability "to dance," "to sing," "to follow the formation," and "to handle props" is not first expressed as abstract written knowledge. It is expressed as the body's familiarity with rhythm, direction, weight, sequence, and collective coordination. Research on

Chinese folk dance culture likewise suggests that the aesthetic form of folk dance is closely related to regional life, customary rituals, and collective psychology; it cannot be analyzed in isolation from the soil that produces it [8].

The transmission of the Qilin Baima Dance has a typical embodied character. Its learning process relies mainly on following, imitation, rehearsal, and festival performance. Performers must simultaneously control props, embody roles, move in procession, shift directions, and coordinate singing. The white horse and the qilin are not merely decorative objects. They function as bodily extensions that must be worn, suspended, swayed, turned, and guided. Through the shoulders, waist, hips, knees, footwork, and hand control, performers animate the props so that they appear as living beings. The technique that emerges from this process is therefore not a simple combination of movements, but a form of bodily knowledge accumulated through long-term performance.

This bodily knowledge is strongly social. The Qilin Baima Dance is not an individual dancer's solo display. It is a collective performance composed of the zhuangyuan, the zhuangyuan's wife, child attendants, parasol and lantern bearers, ceremonial gate carriers, percussionists, and other accompanying roles. Each performer must act in accordance with the overall rhythm and relational order of the troupe, maintaining the expressive features of his or her own role while submitting to the wider order formed by the gate, directions, music, and processional route. In this collective coordination, individual bodily training is transformed into the reproduction of village memory.

2.2. Zhuangyuan Narrative, Prop Performance, and Embodied Memory

The embodied memory of the Qilin Baima Dance first derives from the zhuangyuan narrative of Mo Xuanqing. As a historical figure embedded in Fengkai's local memory, Mo Xuanqing is endowed in folk narrative with symbolic meanings such as diligent study, scholarly success, and honored return. The qilin signifies auspiciousness; the white horse signifies return with honor; and the image of "qilin presenting a jade book" on the ceremonial gate links scholarly attainment, auspicious belief, and local ethical imagination. Each re-enactment of the zhuangyuan's return enables the local society's values concerning achievement, honor, fidelity, and future promise to acquire bodily expression.

From the perspective of prop performance, the most recognizable bodily mechanism of the Qilin Baima Dance may be summarized as "swaying" as the manifestation of auspicious presence. The heads of the qilin and the white horse turn and respond to the performer's bodily movement. Through control of the waist and hips, footwork, and upper-body initiation, performers transform the props from static objects into dynamic living images. Here, "swaying" is not arbitrary shaking. It is a composite image produced through the coordination of person, horse, and qilin. In this way, the legend of the zhuangyuan's honored return is transformed from verbal narrative into a perceptible visual form.

In terms of spatial movement, another core bodily mechanism is "passing through," which articulates ritual access and symbolic passage. In performance, the qilin and the white horse move through different directional positions and repeatedly pass through the ceremonial gate. The gate is both a spatial prop and a symbolic ritual threshold. Each act of passing through confirms, through the body, the narrative

structure of welcoming, congratulating, passage, and return with honor. Thus, village space is no longer merely a site of everyday life; it becomes a performative field that carries ritual order and collective blessing.

The relationship between sound and movement further reveals the dance's mechanism of "singing" as local narration. The Qilin Song is performed in the melodic style of Fengkai mountain songs. Role-based lyrics and percussion patterns interact with one another, making the dance a composite text of bodily performance, sonic narration, and local linguistic culture. The lyrics allow the story of Mo Xuanqing to be narrated, the percussion supports collective movement, and bodily action converts narration and sound into visible images. Together, these elements constitute the embodied memory of the Qilin Baima Dance.

3. Multiple Fields in Spatial Relations and Bodily Formation

The formation of bodily memory is inseparable from field. A field is not a static background, but a relational space produced by natural environment, social organization, cultural symbols, and acting subjects. Following Bourdieu's analytical perspective, the bodily habitus of traditional dance may be understood as the outcome of long-term practice in a specific social space [3]. The Qilin Baima Dance has developed its forms of prop interweaving, directional performance, processional movement through streets, and singing while dancing not by accident, but through the combined action of Fengkai's natural geography, village society, and zhuangyuan culture.

3.1. Geographical Field: Circulation in the Lingnan Borderland

The Qilin Baima Dance is mainly transmitted in the central and western townships of Fengkai County, especially in relation to village spaces around Dazhou and Jiangkou. Fengkai is located in northwestern Guangdong and forms an important county-level space where the Xijiang River basin enters the borderland between Guangdong and Guangxi. Mountains, hills, rivers, village roads, and market towns together constitute the geographical field of the Qilin Baima Dance and provide spatial conditions for its capacity to move in procession, circulate through villages, and perform on site.

Unlike stage dances performed in fixed theatres, the Qilin Baima Dance is marked by mobility. It may be performed in village open grounds, in front of ancestral halls, on threshing grounds, and in other local public spaces; it may also proceed through streets and lanes. When the performance troupe moves through village space, it reorganizes local space through the body. The paths traversed by the dancers, the gates through which they pass, and the points at which they pause to perform together form a vernacular map marked by bodily action.

The geographical field also shapes the texture of movement. Because the qilin and white horse props are relatively large, the performance often takes place in outdoor public spaces, and the troupe must maintain processional order and interweaving routes. As a result, the overall movement style is plain, steady, concise, and festive. This bodily style resonates with the rhythm of life in Fengkai's hilly villages. It contains the celebratory quality of Lingnan folk festivals while preserving the simplicity of rural ritual performance.

3.2. Ritual Field: Village Organization and the Construction of Performative Order

The social character of the Qilin Baima Dance is concentrated in the village ritual field. Its performance is usually associated with the Spring Festival, the birthday commemoration of Mo Xuanqing, and other village celebrations. These temporal nodes are themselves important moments in which village society reconstructs kinship, locality, and ritual relationships. When the percussion begins, the ceremonial gate is raised, and the qilin and white horse enter village space, villagers who are dispersed in everyday life are brought together again through watching, participation, and shared narration.

The ritual field also shapes dance order through role division. The zhuangyuan and his wife form the narrative center; child attendants, parasols, lanterns, and the ceremonial gate produce a ritual order; percussionists organize rhythm. These roles do not constitute a loose assemblage. They form stable divisions in processional sequence, spatial position, and performative function. Performers complete their own movements within the collective relationship and, through collective movement, confirm the order of the village community.

From the perspective of transmission, the Qilin Baima Dance is continued mainly through family relations, master-apprentice teaching, and village performance. The transmission of traditional folk dance is often not a classroom practice detached from life. It occurs during preparations for annual festivals, the repair of props, on-site rehearsals, and collective performances. Younger performers learn footwork, vocal style, prop control, and formation routes by following senior artists. Through this process, bodily habitus is gradually formed. Dance technique is therefore both an artistic ability and a social capacity to participate in village public life.

3.3. Symbolic-Spiritual Field: The Interweaving of Zhuangyuan Culture and Auspicious Imagery

The symbolic-spiritual field of the Qilin Baima Dance is constituted by zhuangyuan culture, auspicious belief, and local ethical imagination. In traditional Chinese culture, the qilin is often regarded as an auspicious creature, while the motif of “qilin presenting a jade book” is linked to learning, scholarly success, and the aspiration to become accomplished. The white horse, in turn, signifies travel, return with honor, and a transformation of status. When the qilin and the white horse are combined with the narrative of Mo Xuanqing, the dance forms a composite symbolic structure: zhuangyuan-qilin-white horse-ceremonial gate-mountain song.

This symbolic-spiritual field distinguishes the Qilin Baima Dance from ordinary festival prop dances. It does not merely display images of auspicious animals. Through the choreographic image of the zhuangyuan and his wife riding the qilin and white horse, it organizes the memory of a local worthy, the ethics of learning, and vernacular aspirations into a single performance. Each time performers sway the qilin and white horse, pass through the ceremonial gate, and sing the Qilin Song, they give bodily expression to a local cultural ideal.

The Qilin Baima Dance also has functions of moral cultivation and local identification. It transforms values such as “learning to become accomplished,” “returning home with

honor,” “faithful love,” and “a promising future” into artistic forms that can be seen, learned, and sung. What children and young people encounter when watching or participating in the dance is not only movement and percussion, but a narrative system concerning local worthies, hometown memory, and cultural pride. In this symbolic-spiritual field, the Qilin Baima Dance becomes an important embodied medium through which Fengkai society sustains shared memory.

4. Contemporary Transformation and Living Continuity in the Interweaving of Fields

The embodied practice of the Qilin Baima Dance is not closed or unchanging. As rural social structures, public cultural policies, and media communication methods change, its transmission fields are also being reconfigured. Traditional village festivals, cultural-center preservation mechanisms, school-based aesthetic education, public performance platforms, and cultural-tourism communication spaces now jointly participate in the contemporary life of the dance. Fang Lili argues that the protection of intangible cultural heritage should not fossilize traditional culture as a static remnant, but should attend to its living relationship with communities, bearers, and real-life contexts [6]. This insight is important for understanding the contemporary transformation of the Qilin Baima Dance.

Contemporary transformation first appears as a shift from village ritual to public performance. Originally embedded in village festivals and local commemorative activities, the Qilin Baima Dance emphasized collective participation and ritual expression. Once it enters public cultural fields, it must respond to new demands concerning stage duration, audience comprehension, visual effect, and communicative narration. Appropriate staging can expand its social influence. However, if mountain songs, ceremonial gates, directional performance, and village ritual atmosphere are excessively weakened, the dance may be detached from its original bodily context.

Living continuity also requires a shift from reliance on individual bearers to multi-subject collaboration. Studies of intangible cultural heritage generally emphasize that bearers' bodily experience is central to continuity, but this experience must be supported by communities, schools, cultural centers, and public cultural institutions [7]. Under the guidance of representative bearers, the transmission of the Qilin Baima Dance should establish an integrated documentation mechanism that includes movement repertoires, lyric texts, percussion patterns, prop-making techniques, formation routes, and audiovisual archives. At the same time, stable links should be built among school-based aesthetic education, community transmission, and festival practice.

Modern translation and adaptation must be premised on preserving core bodily mechanisms. The core of the Qilin Baima Dance does not lie in simply retaining an external performance shell. Rather, it lies in sustaining the life-like quality of props expressed through “swaying,” the ritual spatiality of “passing through,” the narrative quality of mountain-song “singing,” and the cultural symbolism of “welcoming the zhuangyuan.” Cultural-tourism display, short-video communication, and stage adaptation can increase visibility, but they should not reduce the dance to a tourism program or a collage of symbols. Only by maintaining the productive tension among bodily mechanism, field relationship, and cultural meaning can the Qilin Baima

Dance achieve genuine living continuity.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the bodily form of the Qilin Baima Dance of Zhaoqing, Lingnan, is not an external assemblage of isolated dance movements. It is an embodied practice generated through the long-term interaction of Fengkai's local historical memory, village ritual order, and zhuangyuan cultural belief. With the qilin, the white horse, and the ceremonial gate as its formal supports, the Mo Xuanqing zhuangyuan narrative as its spiritual core, and the Spring Festival, the birthday commemoration of Mo Xuanqing, and village festivals as its major performative contexts, the dance transforms the local society's collective understandings of scholarly attainment, auspicious blessing, honored return, faithful ethics, and a better future into a dance form that can be perceived, transmitted, and participated in. The Qilin Baima Dance is therefore not only an artistic expression of Fengkai folk dance, but also an important embodied medium through which local society preserves historical memory, maintains cultural identity, and continues ritual order.

From the perspective of field formation, Fengkai's landscape, its borderland position between Guangdong and Guangxi, and the cultural environment of the Xijiang River basin constitute the geographical field from which the Qilin Baima Dance emerges. Village festivals, role division, troupe organization, and master-apprentice transmission constitute the ritual field in which it continues to evolve. Qilin auspicious imagery, zhuangyuan cultural reverence, and local ethical imagination constitute the symbolic-spiritual field through which its meanings are deepened. These three fields overlap and permeate one another, enabling the dance to embody both the technical experience of individual bearers and the collective memory and cultural symbols of Fengkai society.

Future research and preservation should return more fully to the field. Greater attention should be paid to the integrated and dynamic documentation of bearers' bodily experience, village festival contexts, prop-making techniques, song melodies, lyrics, and transmission genealogies. On the basis of respecting the folk logic and ritual-cultural foundations of

the dance, such work can support the creative transformation and living continuity of the Qilin Baima Dance in public cultural construction, school-based aesthetic education, and rural cultural revitalization.

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