

## Identity Construction and Literacy Inheritance of Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppets in the New Era

Zhihong Chen\*, Metta Sirisuk

Faculty of Fine-applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham 44150 Thailand

Corresponding author: Zhihong Chen, E-mail: metta.s@msu.ac.th

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: January 03, 2025

Accepted: March 22, 2025

Published: March 31, 2025

Volume: 13 Issue: 2

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

This study takes the national intangible cultural heritage of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet as the object, aiming at revealing its identity construction and inheritance mechanism in the context of the new era. The study uses a qualitative research method to systematically collect the historical development, production process, and inheritance status of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets through literature analysis and field research. Combining with the theory of cultural identity, descriptive analysis was used to summarize and discuss the data to reveal the cultural inheritance path of puppet art in the contemporary context. The study results show that the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets show distinctive uniqueness in techniques and artistic styles. However, they face problems such as inheritance faults and lack of innovation in the context of the new era. However, with the help of the international exchange platform and the application of digital technology in the new era, the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets have been revitalized in the global cultural interactions, which provide a practical path for the protection and educational inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

**Key words:** Identity Construction, Educational Inheritance, Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppets, New Era, Artistic Style, Art Literacy

### INTRODUCTION

Puppet art is an important part of Chinese traditional culture, with rich and diverse forms of expression and exquisite skills, which profoundly demonstrates the historical accumulation of Chinese culture (Liu, 2022). As an important branch of this art, the rod puppet has attracted much attention for its flexible manipulation, exquisite modeling design, and vivid artistic expression. Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets are especially prominent, and this art form has been recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage by maintaining traditional craftsmanship while deeply integrating with modern technology, highlighting its unique regional cultural value. In recent years, the protection of intangible cultural heritage has been extended from the single level of skills to the multidimensional fields of inheritance mechanism, social value, and digital protection (Guo & Zhang, 2023). However, the art of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppetry is facing multiple difficulties in the context of globalization and the new era, such as inheritance faults, aging audiences, and lagging in the development of marketization. These problems threaten the continuation of the skill and hinder its integration and development with the contemporary cultural context. How to realize the connection with modern society based on inheriting the cultural core has become an urgent issue.

Exploring this topic affects the survival of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet art itself. It provides valuable space for reflection on the global protection and sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage.

Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets are famous for their exquisite carving skills, unique color painting style, and complex and precise joint design. Its history originated from the grassroots performance of the folk "Bian Tan Ban." Through a long development process, it has gradually become a form of artistic exchange with international influence, fully demonstrating its cultural adaptability and innovative capacity (Li, 2018). Although this art form has been listed on the national intangible cultural heritage list, the realistic challenges of inheritance and protection remain severe. How traditional skills can be revitalized in the wave of globalization in the context of the new era is an important issue that needs to be thoroughly studied and explored.

This study focuses on two key issues: first, how to effectively protect and pass on the medium-sized rod puppet skills in Zizhong in the process of modernization to ensure the vitality and social value of its cultural heritage; and second, how to analyze the cultural significance of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet art through the theory of identity and explore its cultural inheritance through

innovative development. Studying these issues reveals the adaptive strategies of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet art in modern society. It provides valuable insights for the protection and development of intangible cultural heritage.

The significance of the study is to reveal the path of the cultural revitalization of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet as an intangible cultural heritage in the context of the new era based on the identity theory (Liu, 2022). This research perspective deepens the application of identity theory in the field of intangible cultural heritage research and, at the same time, expands its academic value in cultural inheritance and social adaptation. At the practical level, the study combines the current situation of social development, digital technology, international cultural exchanges, and the exploration and summarization of the current inheritance mechanism to assess the practical path for the inheritance and development of the identity of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets. This provides a realistic path for the protection and literacy inheritance of medium-sized rod puppets in Zizhong and accumulates experience for the sustainable inheritance of other intangible cultural heritage programs.

### Research Objectives

This study explores the identity and literacy inheritance mechanism of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets. It proposes strategies for the protection and cultural development of non-heritage in the context of the new era. This study has three objectives:

1. To trace the historical origin, artistic style, and technical characteristics of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets and reveal their uniqueness.
2. To assess the inheritance crisis faced by Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets in the context of the new era.
3. To optimize the cultural inheritance strategy of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets in the new era.

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research method and systematically collects the historical data, production process, and inheritance status of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets through literature analysis and field research. Interviews with inheritors, relevant experts, and audiences, combined with observations of the performance site, ensured the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the data. The study also draws on the conservation experience of other intangible cultural heritage to analyze the optimization strategy for the cultural inheritance of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet in the new era. Based on the four dimensions of cultural identity theory (uniqueness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy), the study utilizes descriptive analysis to summarize the cultural characteristics of puppetry and its influencing mechanisms, providing theoretical support and practical suggestions for the conservation and development of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets.

### RESULTS

#### Historical Origin, Core Techniques, and Artistic Style of Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppets

The Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet's historical development fully reflects its cultural heritage's uniqueness. This art form can be traced back to the Ming and Qing dynasties, initially influenced by Sichuan opera, shadow play, and local opera, active in the countryside in the form of the folk troupe "Biantan Ban," the performance of the content of the Sichuan opera, and gradually integrated into the local artistic characteristics, showing a distinctive color of the regional culture. In the Guangxu period of the Qing Dynasty, with the continuous improvement of the technique and the precipitation of the local culture, the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet gradually matured, forming its own unique artistic style and technique characteristics. It demonstrates the deep heritage of local culture through fine puppet modeling and vivid expression. It gradually enhances its status in the social and cultural context, becoming an important embodiment of the cultural symbols of the Zizhong region (Li, 2018). However, this art form has experienced historical ups and downs, especially during the Cultural Revolution. The survival and inheritance of traditional art suffered a significant impact, and the skills were once on the verge of being lost. After the reform and opening up, Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppet ushered in a revival opportunity, and the establishment of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet troupe in the 1980s not only marked the rebirth of this art form but also became an important symbol of the revitalization of local culture. The development of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet reflects its uniqueness formed in the continuous adaptation to historical changes, which not only condenses the local cultural memory but also lays a deep foundation for its inheritance in the new era.

The core techniques of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets include carving, painting, joint and organ design, and performance techniques, each of which demonstrates its unique cultural value and artistic charm. The carving technique uses balsam camphor wood as the primary material. Through layered carving and multi-layered detailing, the puppet's face and body form present a high degree of three-dimensionality and vivid expressiveness. The painting technique continues the traditional rules of Sichuan opera face painting, using mineral pigments to color by hand, with red symbolizing loyalty and justice, black symbolizing uprightness and strength, and yellow expressing majesty and solemnity, further enhancing the visual expressiveness and cultural connotation of the puppets through the cultural symbolism of the colors and the dress design in the style of Sichuan opera embroidery. The design of the joints and organs combines traditional craftsmanship and mechanics. Through the precise "life stick" and "hand skewer" system, the puppet's movements are natural and smooth, giving it mobility and a variety of theatrical expressions and displaying delicate emotional expression and a high degree of theatricality tension on the stage (Pi, 2017). The performance technique perfectly integrates the manipulation skills with

the singing voice of Sichuan opera, and the manipulator realizes the artistic effect of “unity of man and puppet” through precise movements and emotional interpretation, showing the character’s distinctive character traits and emotional tension in the complex drama. These techniques complement each other, constituting the complete artistic system of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets, fully embodying their uniqueness and literacy inheritance value as local cultural symbols.

The artistic style of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets shows distinctive uniqueness in modeling, color, costumes, and performance. The styling style focuses on form and spirit, with the “divine character first” as the core, giving the puppet characters distinctive character traits through fine carving and artistic treatment (Liu, 2011). Heroic characters are stylized with square outlines, prominent brow bones, and jaws to show their uprightness. In contrast, elderly characters are stylized with fine wrinkles and forward-tilted heads to show their weathered wisdom and kindness. The color style inherits the traditional rules of Sichuan Opera face painting, using red to symbolize loyalty, black to symbolize uprightness, and green to imply benevolence and righteousness, and at the same time, combining with the needs of the characters to use the shades of lime green and light pink, to show the contrast between youthfulness and stability and softness and liveliness, and to strengthen the visual recognition and cultural connotation of the puppets. The costume style is based on Sichuan Opera costumes, incorporating embroidery techniques and richly layered designs, with deep red, black, and gold embroidery to express the solemnity of the solemnity, and the dynamic design of the tassels and shoulder armor to enhance the visual impact of the stage, showing the tension of the drama and the character qualities. The performance style is centered on the “combination of movement and static,” focusing on the precision of puppet movements and emotional expression, and through the coordination of manipulation skills and stage sets, creating the tension and depth of the dramatic narrative. For example, the heavy steps of Xiang Yu’s puppets and the soft spinning of Yu Ji perfectly reflect the complexity of the emotions and the story’s conflict. The fusion of these styles makes Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets glow with unique vitality in combining traditional art and modern technology, and they become a model of regional culture and theater expression.

### **Crisis and Challenge of the Inheritance of Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppet in the Context of the New Era**

Continuity is one of the important dimensions of cultural identity and plays a key role in the inheritance of medium-sized rod puppets in Zizhong. In the new era, the inheritance of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet faces multiple challenges, profoundly affecting its cultural continuity and social identity. The weakening of the family inheritance model and the problem of fault lines are the primary dilemmas in the inheritance of puppetry skills. The traditional family master-apprentice system plays an important role in intergenerational transmission. However, with

the accelerated development of urbanization, many young people choose stable and high-income occupations, and the learning and inheritance of traditional skills gradually lose appeal. The decline of the family inheritance model has not only weakened the intergenerational continuity of puppetry skills but also put the purity of the core skills at risk of dilution. The decline in the number of inheritors has led to a gap in the transmission of puppetry skills, and many key skills are on the verge of being endangered (Lv, 2013).

The marketization dilemma and the audience’s aging further aggravate the inheritance crisis. The traditional puppet performance form lacks competitiveness in the modern cultural market, making it difficult to attract young audiences. The research found that the audience group is mainly middle-aged and older adults, and the lack of a young audience has weakened puppet art’s market vitality. The modern audience’s demand for multimedia integration and interactive experience continues to rise. At the same time, traditional puppetry art, due to the limitations of the form of expression, makes it challenging to meet the aesthetic expectations of the new generation of audience; the lag in the development of the market so that the puppetry art of the economic support and social attention has dropped significantly.

In the new era, changes in social and cultural contexts have posed more complex challenges to the inheritance of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets. While the contemporary cultural environment emphasizes digital communication and globalized exchange, traditional puppetry still relies mainly on-stage performances and offline activities for communication, and the lack of integration with modern communication methods further limits its scope of dissemination and cultural influence (Su, 2024). At the same time, the recognition of traditional culture among young people is gradually weakening. Puppetry art is easily marginalized in the fast-paced modern society. The lack of interest in traditional art forms among young audiences and the break in cultural recognition exacerbate the pressure on the survival of puppetry art in contemporary society.

### **Optimization of the Cultural Inheritance Strategy of Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppet in the New Era**

The inheritance of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets faces the problem of weakening and discontinuity in the family inheritance model, and the trend of occupational diversification in modern society has led to a decline in the willingness of the younger generation to learn traditional skills, making it challenging to support intergenerational inheritance through the traditional family master-apprentice system. The government promotes the “school + workshop” model, establishes a systematic education and training system, and cultivates the new generation of inheritors by combining campus courses, practical teaching, and exceptional financial support to ensure the stable inheritance of skills. The “Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets in schools” project has penetrated basic education. At the same time, local colleges and universities, such as Neijiang Normal College and South Sichuan Early Childhood Normal Higher and Specialized School, have expanded the inheritance methods through

innovative cultural design, academic research, and industrial cooperation so as to enhance the modern adaptability of the art of puppetry. Meanwhile, the construction of the master workshop of the inheritors, the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet museum, and the data collection room have provided a stable academic and practical platform for the protection of skills, cultural research, and historical inheritance. Moreover, the government has set up special funds to provide subsidies for the inheritors and support the research and promotion of traditional skills, laying the foundation for the sustainable development of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet (Liu, 2011).

Marketization dilemmas and an aging audience have limited the development space of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet, the traditional performance form lacks the competitiveness to attract young audiences, and the reduction of economic support has further weakened its social attention. Cultural and creative product development and modern stage innovation have become important strategies to broaden the path to marketability (Ni, 2017). Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet troupe combines sound and light special effects to create immersive performances with modern audience aesthetic orientation and enhances the stage performance of puppetry art with innovative visual presentation. In terms of cultural and creative products, the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet troupe has set up DIY handmade puppet kits, immersive experience courses, and other venues to enhance the audience's interactivity with the art of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet. In 2024, combined with the "Non-Legacy Sichuan Hundred Cities and Hundred Arts" project, Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppet has launched puppet derivatives, stationary dolls, and other diversified products, breaking the traditional puppetry limited to only traditional puppetry, and creating an innovative visual presentation to enhance the stage performance. Diversified products, breaking the limitations of traditional puppets limited to performing arts, so that they enter the daily consumer market. The market-oriented operation will develop the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet from a local drama into a brand with both cultural value and commercial potential and provide economic support for its long-term development (Li, 2022). At the same time, the specialized exhibition stage and practice base set up inside the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet museum not only allow the audience to experience the art of puppetry in an immersive way but also provide a fixed teaching and communication place for the inheritors, so that the traditional skills can be continued and developed in practice.

Changes in the social and cultural context require the modernization and transformation of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets in terms of communication methods. Traditional puppet art relies on offline troupes for promotion, which has a low degree of integration with modern communication methods and affects the cultural identity of young groups. Digital communication and internationalized exchange become important ways to enhance cultural adaptability and influence (Liu & Xie, 2019). The government-led "Medium-sized Rod Puppet Making Craft" in Sichuan Province has expanded the scope of educational dissemination of puppet

art, and the new media platform has become the core of digital promotion. The Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets troupe has created WeChat and "Little Red Book" accounts to promote the art of the Zizhong Medium-sized Rod Puppet through graphics, short videos, and live broadcasts, enhancing interactivity and social media communication. Short videos, live broadcasts, and other new media forms integrate the art of puppetry into the modern social environment, enhancing the cultural identity of young audiences. Regarding international promotion, the troupe participates in tours in France, Japan, and other countries and cooperates with international puppetry organizations to broaden global communication channels through multi-language subtitles and digital archives. The multi-directional integration of digitization, social media, and international communication has enabled Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets to maintain their vitality in the new era's cultural ecology and realize their cultural values' wide dissemination and sustainable development.

## CONCLUSION

The inheritance and development of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets closely match the four core dimensions of cultural identity theory and the measures currently taken, such as the protection of skills, the construction of an educational system, the operation of marketization, digital dissemination, and international promotion, have fully proved the applicability and validity of cultural identity theory in the protection of intangible cultural heritage. These measures consolidate the uniqueness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets and provide systematic support for their adaptation and revitalization in modern society. Through government-led non-heritage protection policies, socialized inheritance models, and the deep integration of science and technology with the market, the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet has ensured its cultural inheritance value and gained a new impetus for development in the global cultural exchange system.

Specifically, uniqueness has been strengthened through the cultivation of inheritors, the protection of skills, and international promotion so that Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets have maintained a distinctive character in cultural exchanges at home and abroad. Continuity relies on on-campus education, exhibition stage, and policy support, realizing the transformation from family inheritance to social inheritance and guaranteeing the stable continuation of the skills. Self-esteem is consolidated in government policy support, branding, and cultural identity enhancement, further strengthening puppet art's social influence. Self-efficacy expands communication channels through digital communication, social media promotion, and international touring, giving it greater adaptability in the context of the new era. The effectiveness of these measures suggests that traditional culture can enhance its vitality with the help of technological innovation and marketization while adapting to the needs of modern society, providing a model that can be drawn upon for the modern adaptation and global dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

The following recommendations can be made based on our findings. Achieved specific results in the new era.

However, it needs to be optimized in terms of inheritance mechanism, market-oriented operation, digital dissemination, and international promotion. It must also rely on the four core dimensions of cultural identity theory (uniqueness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy) to guide the process. As for the inheritance mechanism, the cooperation between universities and NGTs should be deepened, and a special fund should be set up to promote the development of puppetry skills in the direction of specialization and systematization to ensure the continuity of the skills. Market-oriented operations must combine cultural and creative development, modern repertoire production, and cultural tourism to expand the industrial chain and enhance puppet art's commercial value and cultural identity. Combining new media forms such as movies, animation, and AR/VR will improve puppet art's modern appeal and self-esteem. In terms of digital communication, it is necessary to strengthen the use of social platforms to attract young audiences through short videos, live broadcasts, virtual puppet experiences, etc., and enhance the sense of cultural self-efficacy. In terms of international promotion, the uniqueness of Zizhong medium-sized rod puppets can be further consolidated through cross-cultural cooperation, international exhibitions, and multilingual dissemination to gain higher recognition in the global cultural market. Collaboration among the Government, academic institutions, cultural enterprises, and the public will promote the continued prosperity of the Zizhong medium-sized rod puppet in the modernization process and provide a successful example for preserving related cultural heritage.

## REFERENCES

- Guo, P., & Zhang, J. (2023). China's intangible cultural heritage research annual report 2022. *Folk Culture Forum*, 3, 92-101.
- Li, X. (2022). Research on the innovative design of IP image of Quanzhou string Puppet Theater. *Imago Cultural Creation*, 20, 77-79. <https://doi.org/10.20024/j.cnki.CN42-1911/I.2022.20.023>
- Li, Y. (2018). A study on the current situation of the inheritance of Zizhong medium-sized "puppet theater". *Art Review*, 19, 140-141.
- Liu, M. (2022). Characteristics of Chinese puppetry and inheritance development. *Hebei Pictorial*, 10, 1-3.
- Liu, W., & Xie, J. (2019). Internet+ cultural and creative industries: Breaking out of the dilemma of innovative development of traditional intangible cultural heritage – Taking Hunan puppet art as an example. *Journal of Yangzhou University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 23(03), 88-95. <https://doi.org/10.19411/j.cnki.1007-7030.2019.03.010>
- Liu, Y. (2011). *Research on puppet modeling art in Hunan from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage* [Master's thesis]. Hunan University, Hunan.
- Lv, Q. (2013). *Feasibility study of combining puppet art and animation in Shaoyang puppetry* [Master's thesis]. Shaoyang University, Shaoyang.
- Ni, P. (2017). Strategies of cultural and creative product development modeled on regional cultural images--The case of Zhangzhou puppets. *Journal of Minnan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, 31(01), 14-18. <https://doi.org/10.16007/j.cnki.issn2095-7114.2017.01.003>
- Pi, Y. (2017). *Research on the craft and inheritance of medium-sized staff head puppets in Zizhong, Sichuan* [Master's thesis]. Chongqing University, Chongqing.
- Su, Y. (2024). *Cultural and creative design practice based on Zizhong medium-sized rod Puppet Theater* [Master's thesis]. Guangxi Normal University, Guangxi. <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27917/d.cnki.gxcdy.2024.000043>