



Ritual Performance and the Construction of Local Order in Gaozhou Puppetry

Wei Lin ^{1 2 *}

¹Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Macao Polytechnic University

²Department of Chinese Language and Literature, School of Literature and Education,
Guangzhou Xinhua University, China

*WeiLin526@outlook.com

DOI: 10.26417/0ygnpzc0

Abstract

The Gaozhou puppet theater is not only an important traditional performing art in the western Guangdong region, but also a ritualized cultural practice deeply embedded in local customary activities such as annual festivals (nianli) and temple fairs. Existing studies have mainly focused on its artistic form, performance techniques, and heritage preservation, while paying insufficient attention to how it participates in the construction of local social order through ritual performance. Based on fieldwork, interview records, and related survey materials, this study draws on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice to analyze the subject from three dimensions: skill training, ritual performance, and order maintenance. The study finds that during long-term apprenticeship, Gaozhou puppet theater performers internalize norms through bodily training, occupational taboos, and disciplinary mechanisms. In public ritual contexts such as annual festivals, stage spatial arrangements, opening ceremonies, and procedural movements visually enact the sacred authority, ethical relations, and hierarchical order within local society. Through cyclical performances, inter-village dissemination, audience-performer interaction, and ongoing industry negotiation, these norms are repeatedly performed, accepted, and gradually transformed into a shared experiential framework among community members. Therefore, Gaozhou puppet theater is not merely an aesthetic performance form, but a socio-cultural mechanism that, through embodied practice, participates in the affirmation and reproduction of local social order.

Keywords: Annual Festivals; Temple Fairs; Embodied Practice; Folk Belief; Village Society; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Western Guangdong.

Gaozhou puppet theater is a representative form of traditional performing art in western Guangdong and an important cultural practice in local annual festivals, temple fairs, and ritual ceremonies. Historically, it has been primarily active in village public life and folk ritual contexts. Its performances are directed not only toward human audiences in the physical world but also toward deities within the local belief system.

As such, Gaozhou puppet theater cannot be adequately understood merely as a regional operatic form or as a general performing art based on actor–audience interaction [1]. Instead, it should be examined within the broader structural context of local ritual and customary life. It serves not only the functions of entertaining both gods and humans, but also plays a role in organizing relationships between humans and deities, regulating ethical relations, and structuring communal public order.

Existing studies on Gaozhou puppet theater and related regional puppet traditions have primarily focused on its historical origins, artistic forms, performance techniques, repertoire characteristics, and heritage preservation. Such research has effectively outlined the basic profile of Gaozhou puppet theater as a local artistic form and has contributed to its growing academic visibility within the discourse of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding [2].

However, compared with discussions on artistic value and transmission challenges, relatively little systematic analysis has been devoted to its social and ritual significance in practice—particularly how it participates in the construction of local order through performance in ritual contexts. In other words, existing scholarship tends to emphasize “what Gaozhou puppet theater is” and “how to preserve it,” while paying less attention to “how it functions within concrete social life.”

Moreover, although some studies have recognized the close relationship between Gaozhou puppet theater, local religious beliefs, and temple festival practices, these discussions largely remain at a descriptive or contextual level. There is still insufficient elaboration on how puppet performance—through bodily training, professional norms, spatial organization, codified movements, and repetitive enactment—transforms social norms into perceptible, recognizable, and sustainable forms of order [3].

This paper responds to this gap by situating Gaozhou puppet theater within an analytical framework of “ritual performance—embodied practice—local order construction,” and by examining how it operates within this relational field.

Theoretically, this study primarily draws on Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice as analytical tools. Goffman’s discussion of roles, settings, and interaction order helps to interpret how Gaozhou puppet theater, in the context of annual festivals (nianli), constructs a ritual field characterized by role differentiation and interactional rules through performance. Bourdieu’s analysis of habitus, field, and embodied practice, in turn, provides a

framework for explaining how performers develop stable bodily dispositions through long-term apprenticeship, performance practice, and occupational norms, and how social norms are internalized and reproduced through repetitive enactment.

By integrating these two perspectives, it becomes clearer that Gaozhou puppet theater is not merely a medium for the display of local culture, but also an important mechanism through which local social order is materialized, embodied, and routinized [4].

Methodologically, this study is based on fieldwork, interview records, and related survey materials for case analysis. The data include interviews with inheritors of Gaozhou puppet theater as well as observational records and investigative materials collected from performance contexts such as annual festivals and temple fairs. These materials provide an empirical foundation for examining the ritual properties, bodily regulations, and social functions of puppet theater.

Building on this research orientation, theoretical framework, and empirical basis, the paper develops its analysis along three dimensions. First, it examines how performers undergo socialization and discipline through bodily training, occupational taboos, and disciplinary mechanisms during apprenticeship. Second, it analyzes how spatial arrangements, role hierarchies, and procedural sequences in ritual contexts such as annual festivals visually enact local social hierarchies and ethical relations. Finally, it explores how cyclical performances, inter-village dissemination, and performer–audience interactions continuously reproduce, reinforce, and internalize these norms as shared social experience within the community [5].

Literature review

Previous research on Gaozhou puppet theater and related puppet traditions in the southern China has been conducted primarily on the historical origins, artistic features, performing methods, repertoire classification, transmission challenges, and intangible cultural heritage protection. Such research has given a solid base for the understanding of Gaozhou puppet theater, as a regional performing art and as a precious cultural asset. But, little has been studied about the ritual and social roles of the Gaozhou puppet theater in actual village life [6]. Specifically, the existing scholarship has not adequately accounted for the role of puppet performance in the process of creating, making visible and sustaining the local order in the practice of ritual. Performance of Gaozhou puppet theater is not just for the sake of beauty. It is, therefore, important to examine it as a ritualized social practice where relationship is structured and (re)affirmed between deities, performers, villagers, elders, audiences, and local communities. In order to fill this void, this study utilizes the theory of ritual performance of Victor Turner, the theory of practice of Pierre Bourdieu, and the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman when appropriate. Turner's theory is useful in that it underscores ritual as symbolic and performative, as a means by which social relations and communal values are enacted. When it comes to ritual performance, it is not a mere reflection of society, it actively produces a temporary

yet meaningful ritual space, the space of time, and the social role. In the performance space, stage opening ceremonies, the spatial arrangement of the sacred, the performance of the deity and the standardization of procedure all transform the performance space to a space of ritual where sacred authority and communal order are publicly manifested [7].

The thoughts of Turner also shed light on the transitional nature of Gaozhou puppet theatre in festival settings. Annual festivals are occasions during which the ordinary life of the village is temporarily re-organized around ritual worship, collective assembly and public performance. In these times the puppet stage is a symbolic space through which the community engages in the struggle over connection with divine forces, ancestors, kinship and local standards of moral conduct. The performance is thus a ritual process, creating a connection between the sacred and the secular. It amuses human listeners, but also speaks to gods and is involved in the re-creation of community norms. In this respect, the Gaozhou puppet theater plays a part in what can be called the ritual production of local order. The concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital, introduced by Bourdieu, are also useful to consider in the analysis of the embodied aspect of the Gaozhou puppet theater. Habitus is the enduring orientations that people develop in relation to a particular social context. In the case of Gaozhou puppet theater, the performers are not only taught the external technique. They learn the norms of the troupe and the ritual expectations of local society through long-term apprenticeship, bodily training, occupational taboos, ritual preparation and repeated stage experience. The knowledge of the movements, gestures, stage positions, puppet handling and respect for ritual objects become embodied. These practices are not just learnt as a concept but also embodied within the performer's body through repetition. The notion of cultural capital is also applicable to this research. Gaozhou puppet actor has a recognized form of cultural authority as he masters the techniques of performing, ritual procedures, knows a repertoire, occupational taboos and local customs. The power this gives is not political, but symbolic in the village ritual field. An expert performer/heir has knowledge that helps him or her balance tradition and performance, sacred expectations and public entertainment, troupe discipline and community ritual needs. Their abilities are then cultural capital in the flesh – they can then play a meaningful role in local ritual life [8].

The term "field" also contributes to understanding the social context of Gaozhou puppet theater. The performance is not a stand-alone event. It occurs in a local ritual field of temples, village committees, clans, audiences, deities, performers and rival puppet troupes. In this field, there are some rules and expectations that different actors follow. The stage set up, the order of ritual movements, the reverence given to the puppet props and the competition for performance space between the groups, for instance, embody a ritual logic that is structured in social terms. Thus, the puppet theater field is both artistic and ritual, competitive and cooperative, and aesthetic and normative. The dramaturgical approach of Goffman can also shed light on the

interactional aspect of the Gaozhou puppet theater. The concepts of Goffman's performance, role, setting, and interaction order enable us to approach ritual performance as a structuring of relationship between performers, audience, and sacred figures. The stage is not only a stage in Gaozhou puppet theatre, but also a regulated interactional environment. The arrangement of puppets, the performers' movements, the seating of elders, the focusing of the viewers' gaze, and the order of ritual actions all create a visual order of interaction. In this organized environment, the community is able to see the social hierarchy and moral relations. The concept of "local order" is not legal or political order, but rather customary order in the village, as presented in these theoretical frameworks. It covers sacred hierarchy, god/human relations, kinship ethics, generational ranking, performer discipline, occupational norms, and ritual audience behavior. Gaozhou puppet theater is not directly establishing rules for the construction of this order, but by creating norms that are visible, embodied, emotional, and repeatable. Local values are made visible, tangible, memorable and experienced again and again through performance. Thus, three interrelated dimensions can be used to sum up the theoretical framework of this paper. First, as Bourdieu's perspective, the training of apprentices and training of the body generate disciplined performers who internalize the habitus of Gaozhou puppet theatre. Secondly, from Turner's point of view, annual festivals and temple fairs provide ritual settings that are open and allow puppet performance to make public sacred authority, moral values, and communal hierarchy. Third, Goffman sees the performance context as structuring interaction between performers and audiences, deities, elders, and village participants. The paper finally uses the three theoretical approaches, ritual theory, practice theory, and dramaturgical analysis, to show that the Gaozhou puppet theatre is a socio-cultural mechanism that involves the coordination of the body, space, performance, emotion, and repetition to maintain the local socio-cultural order [9].

I. Bodily Discipline in Technical Training

The transmission of Gaozhou puppet theater is not merely a process of technical instruction, but rather a socially embedded mechanism of bodily socialization. For troupe members, apprenticeship involves more than mastering puppet manipulation techniques and stage conventions; it also entails acquiring, through prolonged training, a set of embodied experiences closely linked to occupational ethics, role consciousness, and behavioral norms [10].

The training of Gaozhou puppet theater performers generally follows a four-stage trajectory: "following the hand (gen shou), receiving the hand (jie shou), releasing the hand (fang shou), and passing on the baton (jie bang)." This process should not be understood simply as a sequential progression of technical skill acquisition. Rather, it corresponds to a gradual incorporation of the performer into the internal order of the troupe, marking successive stages of entry into its structured social and professional hierarchy.

During the “following the hand” stage, apprentices primarily familiarize themselves with the troupe’s operational routines through observation and auxiliary participation. This includes understanding basic conventions such as prop preparation, role allocation, and performance setup. In the “receiving the hand” stage, apprentices begin to participate in partial performance practices, gradually forming preliminary motor memory through imitation and correction.

In the “releasing the hand” stage, apprentices are granted more independent performance opportunities. At this point, their technical proficiency and ability to respond in real time under performance conditions are subject to substantive evaluation. Finally, “passing on the baton” signifies a transition in status: the apprentice is no longer merely a performer, but progressively assumes responsibility for sustaining the transmission of troupe techniques and the continuity of occupational norms.

This four-stage trajectory demonstrates that the learning process in Gaozhou puppet theater is not a neutral acquisition of skills. Rather, it constitutes a process of socialization in which bodily training functions as the medium through which role transformation and identity formation are achieved.

Senior performers often summarize this training process as “three years of observation, five years of practice, and ten years before taking the stage properly.” This formulation indicates that the core of puppet theater training does not lie in the rapid acquisition of discrete techniques, but in the gradual sedimentation of performance conventions, stage awareness, and occupational discipline into a stable set of embodied dispositions through prolonged and repetitive practice.

A performer’s ability to accurately execute puppetry manipulation, blocking, entrances, exits, and stylized movements in formal performances is not primarily based on recalling procedural instructions in the moment. Rather, it stems from the fact that these norms have already been internalized as embodied practical competence through long-term training. In this sense, the process of apprenticeship itself constitutes a mechanism of order formation: through bodily training, it translates hierarchical relations, behavioral expectations, and occupational ethics within the troupe into the practical foundation of individual action.

If apprenticeship primarily produces bodily socialization through sustained training, then the internal system of taboos and disciplinary practices within the troupe further transforms this socialization into a form of perceptible and enforceable bodily discipline. Gaozhou puppet troupes generally observe a series of strict occupational taboos, such as prohibitions against stepping over the puppet chest, the requirement to fast and bathe before performances, and the rule that puppets must be placed facing inward. Although these rules may appear as informal troupe customs, they in fact constitute a normative system centered on respect for roles, reverence for the profession, and the maintenance of performance order.

The puppet chest is not treated as an ordinary storage container but is endowed with symbolic significance. Stepping over it is interpreted as a violation of occupational norms. Pre-performance purification rituals reflect the performer's bodily regulation before entering the performance state. The inward-facing placement of puppets is likewise not a mere storage convention, but is tied to a structured respect for performative order and role sanctity [11].

More importantly, these taboos are not confined to verbal admonitions; they are enforced through concrete disciplinary actions that translate norms into bodily experience. In one documented case, a young performer who accidentally touched the puppet chest with his foot was assigned to organize the troupe's equipment for an entire month and was prohibited from performing during that period. The significance of this case does not lie in its exceptional punitive nature, but in what it reveals about the troupe's enforcement mechanism.

Organizing the equipment is itself a repetitive, meticulous, and obedience-oriented form of labor. Through this sustained activity, the performer relearns respect for puppets, instruments, and occupational rules. At the same time, the suspension from performance functions as a form of exclusion that makes the relationship between individual behavior and collective order explicitly visible. Disciplinary action thus operates not merely as negative punishment, but as a practical process through which norms are re-encountered and re-embedded via bodily labor.

From this perspective, taboos and disciplinary practices in Gaozhou puppet troupes are not simply empirical means of backstage regulation. They constitute an essential mechanism of internal governance within the troupe's cultural system. Through long-term training and everyday practice, they cultivate performers' sensitivity to occupational boundaries, respect for performance objects, and capacity for self-regulation.

In this way, institutional norms are no longer external constraints imposed on individuals, but are transformed into embodied discipline that performers can autonomously enact. It is precisely at this level that the transmission of Gaozhou puppet theater transcends the technical question of "being able to perform" and enters the broader question of "how one becomes a legitimate member of the troupe's social and moral order."

II. Order Performance in Ritual Contexts

If apprenticeship training and occupational taboos primarily shape performers' bodily discipline within the troupe, then in public ritual contexts such as annual festivals (nianli) and temple fairs, this discipline is further transformed into a visible enactment of order through spatial arrangement, role sequencing, and procedural movement.

Gaozhou puppet theater is closely intertwined with annual festivals and ritual worship practices. Its performances are not general theatrical events in a

conventional stage sense, but rather ritualized practices deeply embedded in the fabric of local customary life.

The annual festival (nianli) is one of the most important folk ritual events in western Guangdong and constitutes the core context in which Gaozhou puppet theater performs its ritual functions. Within this field, the stage is not merely a physical structure for performance, but a socially and ritually organized space of order. It is typically positioned directly in front of the temple, forming a vertical spatial sequence of “deity—puppet—human,” in which the deity occupies the foremost position, the puppets are situated in the middle as mediating agents, and the audience is positioned at the rear [12].

This spatial configuration is not designed solely for visual or acoustic convenience. Rather, it operates through positional differentiation to distinguish sacred authority, performative mediation, and secular participation, thereby rendering the hierarchical structure of local society directly visible within the performance setting.

Such an ordering principle is not only reflected in the overall layout of the ritual space but also reproduced within the internal arrangement of puppets and audiences respectively. Puppets are categorized and positioned according to their narrative and social roles: deity figures occupy elevated positions, civil officials are placed below them, and commoner figures are arranged at the lowest level. Similarly, the audience is spatially organized according to kinship status and generational hierarchy, with clan elders typically seated in more forward and central positions.

In this sense, the performance space of the annual festival is not an abstract or flat theatrical environment, but a socially stratified spatial configuration endowed with clear directional hierarchy and symbolic distinctions of rank. Through such spatial arrangement, pre-existing structures of sacred order, kinship hierarchy, and ethical relations within local society are rendered visible and perceptible. Before spectators even enter a viewing position, they are already situated within a ritual framework that encodes social order as lived experience.

Prior to the commencement of the annual performance, the “opening of the stage” (kai tai) ritual constitutes a crucial transitional moment. Performers typically circle the stage three times using a specific set of ritualized steps known locally as the “immortal step” (shenxianbu), thereby completing a symbolic sacralization of the performance space through codified bodily movement.

What is analytically significant here is not the physical act of circling the stage itself, but the spatial transformation mechanism it enacts. Through this ritualized sequence, a site originally embedded in everyday life is redefined as a ritualized performance field governed by customary constraints and endowed with sacred significance [13].

The significance of the “immortal step” (shenxianbu) lies in its function as a visible and repeatable bodily act through which the commencement of performance is declared, while simultaneously signaling a transformation in the ontological status of

the space itself. In other words, the opening of the stage is not a simple indication of temporal beginning; rather, it constitutes a reconfiguration of the relational structure among spectators, performers, and deities.

As this ritual unfolds, the audience gradually shifts into a more restrained and orderly mode of attention and behavior. This indicates that the “immortal step” is not merely an expression of reverence toward the divine, but also an implicit regulatory mechanism for collective conduct. Through the sacralization of space, spectators’ speech and bodily comportment are subtly incorporated into an established interactional order.

Beyond spatial organization and opening rituals, the procedural movements embedded in Gaozhou puppet theater performances also constitute a crucial dimension of order enactment. Over time, these codified gestures have come to carry the functional burden of expressing social relations, ethical norms, and role hierarchies. Rather than articulating abstract norms discursively, they translate such norms into perceptible bodily forms through regulated rhythm, posture, and spatial distance [14].

For instance, in the “troop inspection” (dianbing) scene, the general puppet taps the roster at a fixed rhythm, while subordinate puppets respond in a synchronized and uniform manner. The analytical focus here is not simply the reenactment of military inspection, but the way in which rhythm, force, and sequential coordination between actions visibly articulate hierarchical relations of command and obedience. What the audience perceives is not merely a representation of warfare, but a bodily articulation of an order in which commands are issued and executed within a structured hierarchy.

Similarly, in the “surrender” (shou jiang) scene, the defeated general performs a standardized sequence of three kneeling steps. This is not simply a dramaturgical device for theatrical effect, but a formalized bodily enactment that renders submission, hierarchy, and the restructuring of authority visible. Through this codified sequence, social ethics that would otherwise require verbal articulation are condensed into continuous bodily movement. The audience does not need supplementary explanation; meaning is directly legible in the gesture itself—what constitutes submission and how order is restored.

Taken together, spatial arrangement in the annual festival context, the “immortal step” in the opening ritual, and the procedural movements embedded in specific performance segments collectively constitute the mechanism of order enactment in Gaozhou puppet theater’s ritual performance system. They render sacred authority, ethical relations, and social norms no longer as abstract concepts, but as visible forms inscribed in space, body, and movement. It is through this process that Gaozhou puppet theater, as a local performance tradition, continuously participates in the affirmation and reproduction of local social order.

Methodology

The study takes an ethnographic case study approach and focuses on the role of Gaozhou puppet theater in the processes of the construction and reproduction of local order in the form of ritual performance [15]. Gaozhou puppet theater is so deeply involved in annual festival activities, temple fairs, village worship activities and troupe-based apprenticeship training that an ethnographic approach is suitable for discussing the social significance of the puppet theater in the specific local context. Instead of examining puppet theater simply as a textual or artistic artefact, this study explores it as a living cultural practice that is influenced by the performers, the audience, the ritual organizer, the village elders and the local customary institutions. The fieldwork was conducted in Gaozhou and surrounding villages in western Guangdong from [insert month/year] to [insert month/year]. In these days the researcher noted the puppet theatre performances in the annual festivals, temple fairs and in other ritual days. The fieldwork concentrated on three aspects: first, the internal training and disciplinary routines of the puppet theatre groups; second, the ritual layout of the performance areas, such as locations for the stage, ceremonies at the beginning and at the end, and the arrangement of the stage around deities; and third, the relationship between performers, audience, community elders and ritual organizers during the repeated festival performances. Observations were made in the field, which included written fieldnotes, descriptions of performance, and ritual notes of ritual procedures. Selected participants were also interviewed using Semi-structured format. The interviewees comprised the inheritors of the puppet theater in Gaozhou, senior performers, younger apprentices, organizers of the puppet theater, villagers who perform rituals, and audience members. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling method due to their direct participation in puppet theater performance, ritual organization, apprenticeship training, or in local festivals. Other relevant participants were introduced by the senior performers or by the village contacts and snowball sampling was also employed. This allowed the study to incorporate community viewpoints from the wider ritual context as well as professional viewpoints from within the puppet groups.

The interviews were largely on the aspects of training experiences, taboos among performers, rules among the troupe, ritual procedure, performance memories, audience expectations, and the performers' perception of puppet theater and local customs. Where permission was granted, interviews were audio-recorded. If recording was not appropriate due to ritual sensitivity or participants' preference, detailed written notes were taken immediately after the conversation. The materials from the interviews were subsequently sorted, recorded and correlated with the observation data collected in the field. Local terms, including "following the hand", "receiving the hand", "releasing the hand", "passing on the baton", "opening the stage", "immortal step", "sending plays" were preserved in the translation as they represent culturally-specific practices in Gaozhou puppet theater. The study also used the relevant survey materials, local cultural documents, performance records, and

secondary literature on the Gaozhou puppet theatre, folk ritual and intangible cultural heritage. The data from the field and interviews were used in conjunction with these materials to contextualise the information. They also contributed to the recognition of the continuity and transformation of the link between puppet theater and the ritual life of the village and local cultural transmission. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. In the first place, the content of the fieldnotes, the interview transcriptions and documentary materials were read over and over again, seeking to uncover common themes concerning aspects of bodily training, ritual procedure, spatial arrangement, occupational discipline, audience interaction and social hierarchy. Second, these patterns were then abstracted into larger categories of patterns, such as "bodily discipline," "ritual space," "sacred hierarchy," "performance repetition," "inter-village circulation," and "order maintenance. Third, these themes were explored from the theoretical perspective of Victor Turner's ritual theory, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, cultural capital, and field, and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. The analytical process enabled empirical materials to be linked to the wider theoretical issues of ritual performance, embodied practice and the reproduction of local order [16].

Ethical issues were also considered in the research process. The participants were told the academic reasons for the study and they were asked to take part voluntarily. If required, personal information was omitted or anonymized to ensure participants' confidentiality. Special attention was paid to the recording of the ritual practices and occupational taboos because some aspects of puppet theater are considered by the performers to be professionally and ritually sensitive. The methodological design of this study is a combination of field observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The combination makes it possible to have a more thorough understanding of the puppet theater of Gaozhou as a performance tradition and ritualized social practice. It also offers an empirical foundation for studying the expression, presentation, repetition and reproduction of local order in the village ritual via puppet theatre.

III. Repetitive Performance and the Maintenance of Local Order

If spatial organization and procedural actions in ritual performances enable local social order to be concentrated and displayed on the stage, the persistence of this order depends on the fact that it is not confined to a single performance event. Instead, it is continuously reproduced, accepted, and internalized as a shared social experience through cyclical performances, inter-village circulation, affective identification, and occupational negotiation [17].

The capacity of Gaozhou puppet theater to participate in the construction of local order does not derive solely from its ability to enact order at a given moment. Rather, it stems from its capacity to stabilize and sediment such order through repeated practice over time.

Gaozhou puppet theater is characterized by the fact that its performances are not sporadic cultural events, but are closely embedded within cyclical ritual practices such as annual festivals. The same repertoire is often performed over several consecutive days, and this repetition should not be understood simply as an extension of program duration, but as a socially productive mechanism.

For audiences, repeated exposure to the same performance gradually transforms narrative relations, behavioral patterns, and value judgments from “dramatic plot elements” into taken-for-granted social cognition. For younger performers, annual and repeated participation functions as sustained embodied training, during which they continuously adjust movements, rhythm, and role expression through iterative performance, thereby aligning themselves more closely with established norms. In this sense, repetition operates simultaneously on both sides: audiences develop stable habits of reception through viewing, while performers develop stable embodied dispositions through practice.

From the perspective of order maintenance, the key function of cyclical performance lies in its ability to transform norms that would otherwise require explicit moral instruction or institutional enforcement into embodied experiences that are continuously reproduced through watching and performing. Audiences may not articulate ethical principles in abstract terms, but through repeated exposure to similar performance structures, narrative patterns, and role relations, they gradually develop a stable sense of what is socially appropriate and what constitutes disorder. Likewise, performers do not reconstruct normative rules anew in each performance; rather, these expectations are gradually internalized as embodied routines that feel “self-evident” in practice.

Thus, the role of Gaozhou puppet theater in sustaining local order is not primarily realized through one-time didactic transmission, but through long-term, repetitive, and cyclical practice that embeds norms into the everyday sensory and cognitive world of local social actors.

More noteworthy than cyclical performance itself is the customary practice of “sending plays” (song xi). During the annual festival of one village, representatives from neighboring villages often attend performances and, upon returning, imitate relevant elements in their own local presentations. This detail indicates that the normative structures carried by Gaozhou puppet theater do not circulate solely within a single village, but are disseminated across a wider regional field through observation, imitation, and exchange [18].

In other words, the puppet theater tradition functions not only as an intra-village ritual practice, but also as a trans-local cultural mechanism. From the perspective of order maintenance, “sending plays” is not merely the transmission of repertoire or performance skills, but the circulation of normative modes of expression.

Representatives from different villages absorb not only storylines and performance techniques, but also opening rituals, role rhythms, interactional etiquette, and the ways in which deities, kin groups, and audiences are addressed and organized. These elements are reactivated in their home villages through imitation and reproduced in new ritual contexts.

It is precisely through this chain of inter-community bodily imitation that the local ethics and interactional order embodied in Gaozhou puppet theater extend beyond individual troupes and single villages, acquiring a broader regional stability. In this way, puppet theater is not simply “a performance tradition of a village,” but becomes a medium through which a shared sense of order is circulated across regional society.

At the same time, the maintenance of order in Gaozhou puppet theater also depends on an affective basis formed through emotional resonance. In scenes such as the wrongful accusation of loyal officials or the punishment of local tyrants, performers use puppet movements—such as trembling gestures or forceful arm strikes—to elicit audiences’ indignation, sympathy, and vocal approval.

What is produced here is not merely transient emotional response, but an evaluative affect structured around categories such as loyalty, righteousness, goodness, and evil. This form of emotional judgment is not external to social order; rather, it constitutes one of the key psychological foundations through which local society accepts and legitimizes order. A particular action, performance, or outcome is regarded as “appropriate” not only because it conforms to abstract normative principles, but also because it resonates with the embodied feelings and affective expectations already embedded in the local moral world.

In this sense, the maintenance of order operates not only at the level of rational cognition, but also through continuous confirmation at the level of sensory and emotional experience.

Beyond repetitive reception at the audience level, the internal organization of troupes and inter-troupe relations also constitutes a crucial dimension of order maintenance. Competition among Gaozhou puppet troupes does exist; however, it is typically regulated through ritualized and customary forms of coordination. For example, troupes may avoid scheduling identical repertoires in the same area, or determine annual performance slots through practices such as “drawing lots to allocate markets” (*chou qian fen shichang*). This indicates that industry order is not spontaneously formed, but actively maintained through ritualized negotiation and rule-based coordination [19].

The practice of “drawing lots to allocate markets” is not merely a technical method of distributing performance opportunities. Rather, it functions as a ritualized mechanism for legitimizing fairness. The randomness of the draw allows outcomes to be broadly accepted by all parties, while the ritual form of the procedure confers symbolic legitimacy on the allocation itself. Its key function lies in transforming latent

market competition and potential conflict of interest into a collectively recognized normative order.

From this perspective, competition within the Gaozhou puppet theater industry is not absent; rather, it is contained and regulated within an administratively and ritually mediated framework of coordination. Such mechanisms not only maintain a basic balance among troupes, but also enable the tradition to persist in a state where cooperation and competition coexist.

In summary, the mechanism of order maintenance in Gaozhou puppet theater is not limited to single-stage performances on the stage. It operates continuously through multiple pathways, including cyclical performances, inter-village circulation, affective identification, and institutional negotiation. It is precisely through these repeated practices that the ethical norms, behavioral patterns, and interactional structures embedded in puppet theater are extended from individual performances into a shared social experience.

In other words, the long-term persistence of Gaozhou puppet theater in local society is not only due to the preservation of an ancient performance tradition, but more fundamentally because it continuously transforms order into habit, norms into affect, and performance into an integral part of social life through ongoing ritual repetition.

International comparisons and broader implications

The results of this study do not only apply to Gaozhou, but also to a wider context. The ritual and social role of Gaozhou puppet theater can be generalized and related to other ritualized performance traditions in other cultures, even if the theatre has regional characteristics. In many cultures, performance is not solely a form of entertainment or art. It is also a medium in which sacred authority, collective identity, moral values and social hierarchy are collectively enacted and reproduced publicly. It is helpful to compare this to Balinese wayang kulit, which is intimately linked with ritual offerings, temple ceremonies, cosmological order and community life. Balinese wayang is not just a form of theatre for the public, as is Gaozhou puppet theater. It is also a ritual act that can act as a liaison between people, gods, ancestors and the broader moral world. Puppetry exists in both situations in a transitional space between the sacred and the secular. The puppeteer/performer does not just play figures for dramatic effect, but is involved in a ritual process in which social and cosmological order is affirmed. There are other parallels to be noted in Japanese ritual performance practices, including kagura and some of the rites of the temples and shrines. The traditions reveal the way in which the rules of body movement, sacred space, music, costume and repeated ceremonial procedure can make performance a vehicle for ritual communication. Gaozhou puppet theater shares its interest in the sacralization of performance space and the public performance of relationships between human communities and divine forces in this regard. African traditions of masquerade also offer valuable comparative insights, including the Yoruba Egungun [20]. The performance of egungun is intrinsically linked with the presence of the

ancestors, moral control, collective memory, and community authority. Ancestral power is manifested through costume, movement, rhythm and public display. While there are significant differences between the forms of Gaozhou puppet theatre and Egungun performance, they both reveal the power of ritualized performance to make invisible or abstract authority visible and embodied. They also demonstrate how performance can serve as a means to uphold moral norms, intergenerational relationships, and community identity.

The broader significance of embodied performance in the organisation of social and ritual life is also reflected in the South Asian ritual theatre traditions like Yakshagana, Kathakali and Theyyam. Usually, these traditions involve narration, music, gesture, costume, religious symbolism, and community involvement. They are not confined to the realm of representation, as are Gaozhou puppet theater; instead, they establish ritual moments in which moral dilemmas, divine rule, heroic figures, and social values are all shared. The comparison indicates that the connection between performance and order is broader in an anthropological sense and not just specific to Gaozhou. The international comparisons serve to provide some insight into the general significance of this study. They show, first, that rituals of performance practice can be embodied systems of social knowledge. Norms are not only communicated in the rules and through verbal instruction, but also in the gesture, the rhythm, the posture, the spatial arrangement, the repetition, and the participation of the audience. Second, they prove the possibility of a connection between sacred authority and the social life of the people. Third, they propose that intangible cultural heritage is not just a cultural object to be conserved but also an ongoing social process that involves communities in the structuring of memory, identity, morality, and order. In the Gaozhou case, the local order is built up by the interplay of the troupe discipline, ritual space, codified movement, cyclical repetition and inter-village circulation. Given the wide variety of well-known ritual performance traditions in the world, Gaozhou puppet theater is not well represented in English-language scholarship. This research situates it into a comparative perspective, and it can be concluded that the puppetry of Gaozhou is not only a regional Chinese folk art, but also a valuable case study in international research into ritual performance, embodied practice and the social functions of intangible cultural heritage. The comparison also reveals the uniqueness of Gaozhou puppet theater at the same time. It is special in that puppet performance is integrated into the various annual festivals, temple fairs, village worship, occupational taboos, and ritual exchanges between villages. Gaozhou puppet theater is not a performance theater focused primarily on the actor's body like some performance theater, but rather a theater that takes the actor's body as a mediated body. The puppet can be a ritual agent in which performers and deities are symbolically linked to the audience and the village community. This mediated embodiment is an interesting way to broaden comparative work on ritual performance to include non-human agents. The overall significance of this research is that Gaozhou puppet theater is to be seen in a broader context of ritualized performance traditions in which the body, the space, the art and the social order are all deeply connected. The analysis of its performance in

relation to Chinese folk performance and intangible cultural heritage is not only to the study of Chinese folk performance but also to the international debates on the visibility of social norms through performance, its emotional persuasiveness and its sustainability within the community.

Conclusion

Gaozhou puppet theater is not merely a traditional performing art in western Guangdong, nor simply an auxiliary component of local ritual life. Through an examination of its apprenticeship training, occupational taboos, annual festival performances, and repetitive enactment practices, this study shows that it in fact constitutes a ritualized performance system with clear functions of social order construction.

Within the troupe, performers gradually develop stable behavioral dispositions through long-term training, bodily discipline, and occupational regulations, thereby completing a process of socialization that extends from technical learning to role identification. In public ritual contexts such as annual festivals, stage space, opening rituals, and procedural movements collectively render sacred authority, ethical relations, and hierarchical structures within local society visible and performable. Through the continued operation of cyclical performances, inter-village circulation, and audience–performer interaction, these norms are further reproduced, accepted, and internalized as shared social experience.

In this sense, the function of Gaozhou puppet theater is not limited to aesthetic expression. More fundamentally, it operates as a socio-cultural mechanism through which local order is confirmed and reproduced via embodied practice.

In terms of research significance, this paper attempts to move the study of Gaozhou puppet theater beyond the conventional frameworks of “art form analysis” and “intangible cultural heritage preservation” toward an analytical focus on “ritual practice and social order.” Rather than treating puppet theater merely as a regional opera form, a folk craft legacy, or an object of heritage safeguarding, this study emphasizes how it operates within concrete social life—how bodily training, spatial organization, and codified movements transform abstract norms into perceptible and executable practical orders.

This perspective highlights that the social function of Gaozhou puppet theater does not lie primarily in the explicit “transmission” of ethical doctrines, but rather in its capacity to enable local actors to learn, internalize, and reproduce normative structures through repeated performance. This approach contributes to a renewed understanding of the position of traditional performing arts within local societies, and offers a concrete case for rethinking intangible cultural heritage not only as a “preservation object,” but as an active mechanism of social practice.

However, the scope of this study remains limited. The analysis is primarily based on existing fieldwork materials, interview records, and performance documentation

from the Gaozhou region, and therefore reflects mainly the situated practices of puppet theater within a specific ritual and cultural context. Comparative analysis with puppet traditions in other regions—particularly regarding ritual structures, occupational regulations, and social functions—has not been fully developed.

Future research may expand the comparative horizon by examining Gaozhou puppet theater alongside traditions in eastern Guangdong, Hakka regions, and other southern Chinese puppet theater systems, thereby further exploring both the shared mechanisms and regional variations in how performance traditions participate in the construction of social order.

Ethics Statement

This study involved field observations and interviews with Gaozhou puppet theater performers, inheritors, troupe members, ritual participants, and community members. Before each interview or field conversation, participants were informed of the academic purpose of the research and the intended use of the collected materials. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. To protect participants' privacy, identifying personal information has been omitted or anonymized where necessary. Interview materials and field notes were used only for academic analysis, and care was taken not to disclose sensitive information related to personal identity, troupe affairs, occupational taboos, or local ritual practices. Participants were also free to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the research process. The study followed standard ethical principles for qualitative social science research, including respect for participants, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible representation of local cultural practices.

References

- [1] Goffman, E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [M]. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- [2] Bourdieu, P. *Le sens pratique (The Logic of Practice)* [M]. Trans. Jiang Zihua. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2003.
- [3] Foucault, M. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison)* [M]. Trans. Liu Beicheng, Yang Yuanying. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2012.
- [4] Zhuang Haitao. On the Artistic Value of Gaozhou Puppet Theater [J]. *Chinese Art*, 2012(8).
- [5] Cao Zhangling. On the Current Difficulties and Development Path of Gaozhou Puppet Theater [J]. *University Education*, 2012(07):48–49.
- [6] Ye Mingsheng. Religious Cultural Ecology of Puppet Theater and Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection [J]. *Cultural Heritage*, 2009(1):38–49.
- [7] Song Xizhi. *Folk Customs in the Opera Industry* [M]. Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, 2015.

- [8] Chen Rongfu. The Evolution of Culture: Studies on Ritual and Ceremony [M]. Harbin: Heilongjiang People's Publishing House, 2004.
- [9] Wang Wenzhang. Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage [M]. Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2006.
- [10] Gao Bingzhong. Folk Culture and Folk Life [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1994.
- [11] Gao Bingzhong. The Lifeworld of the Chinese: An Anthropological Approach to Folklore [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010.
- [12] Zhou Xing. "Folk Religion" and the State's Religious Policy [J]. Open Times, 2006(4):124-136.
- [13] Zhou Xing. Ancestor Worship and Folk Religion: Dialogue with Scholars [A]// Jin Ze, Chen Jinguo (eds.). Religious Anthropology, Vol. 1 [C]. Beijing: Minzu Publishing House, 2009:246-254.
- [14] Ye Chunsheng. Lingnan Folk Culture [M]. Guangzhou: Guangdong Higher Education Press, 2011.
- [15] Gaozhou Local Gazetteer Compilation Committee. Gazetteer of Gaozhou County [M]. Beijing: China Book Company, 2005.
- [16] Özder, L., & Söyük, M. (2019). The art of the puppetry as a touristic object. *Uluslararası Turizm Ekonomi ve İşletme Bilimleri Dergisi*, 2(2), 269-275.
- [17] Yakup, M. R., Awangko, H. A., Hishamuddin, S., Abdul Riezal, D., & Mohd. Jefri, S. (2017). Bilum: A cultural object of the Pagan Melanau. *Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences*, 12(25SI), 6968-6973.
- [18] Dim, Abdul Riezal. (2025). From Ritual to Performance: Tracing the Origins of Puppetry Theatre. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*. 10. e003561. 10.47405/mjssh.v10i9.3561.
- [19] Tu Duoyang. (2021). Anhui Administration College. *Journal of Anhui Administration Institute*. *Journal of Anhui Administration Institute*, 93-99.
- [20] Wei Aitang. (2018). Guangxi Institute of National Culture and Art. *Puppetry National Art*, 154-160.
- [21] Yang Yanhui. (2021). Talking about the inheritance and development of local puppet drama from Rugao stick puppet drama. *Drama House*, 12.
- [22] Lin Pengyu, Wu Kai, Shi Zhengping, et al (2022). A Study on the Current Situation of Yulin Puppetry in Guangxi under the Perspective of Rural Revitalization. *Fashion Tomorrow*, (03): 143-146.
- [23] Hou Shuang, Liu Aili, Huang Hong (2019). Discussion on the Development Trend of China's Cultural Tourism Industry. *Journal of Capital Normal University (Natural Science Edition)*, 40 (04): 58-66.
- [24] Yang Jia Ning, Liu Xin, Cao Ting, et al (2023). Study on the Digital Inheritance and Development Path of National ICH Zhang zhou Puppet Heads. *Footwear Craft and Design*, 3(06):125-128.
- [25] Li Yilan (2021). The Cultural Value and Inheritance Protection of Gaozhou Puppetry from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage. *Art Criticism*, (10):163-167.

- [26] Guo Yan (2024). "Intangible Cultural Heritage+Tourism" Helps the Integration and Upgrading of Culture and Tourism. Shanxi Daily, 02-19(003).
- [27] Pu Bo (2021). Technology Empowerment, New Realm of Innovative Development for Jinjiang Hand Puppetry. China ArtsNewspaper, 12-27 (008). DOI:10.28155/n.cnki.ncysb.2021.002770.