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Bawangbian as a Posthuman Cultural Performance of the Bai Nationality Dance

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Abstract

Rooted in Bai agricultural, spiritual, and ancestral lifeways, the Bawangbian dance, marked by rhythmic body strikes using a bamboo whip adorned with coins, embodies seasonal cycles, animal behaviors, and cosmological symbolism. The objective is to investigate the Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality as a posthuman cultural performance. Fieldwork was conducted in both rural and institutional settings across Dali, with data collected through participant observation, audiovisual documentation, archival research, and semi-structured interviews with four key informants: cultural bearers, professional dancers, and community members. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of body-prop assemblage, ecological symbolism, and animistic ritual. Results show that the whip acts not as a passive prop but as a co-performer guiding movement, while the choreography reflects ecological rhythms and spiritual offerings. The study also highlights the role of gender, generational interaction, and digital adaptation in sustaining Bawangbian's relevance in both local and virtual spaces. This research contributes to posthumanist discourse by demonstrating how indigenous performance practices enact relational ontologies and propose embodied models of ecological ethics. Future studies should explore comparative posthuman frameworks across ethnic ritual dances and examine the impact of digital mediation on traditional embodiment.

Keywords: Bawangbian Dance, Posthumanism, Bai Nationality, Ecological Performance, Cultural Ritual.

Introduction

The Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality, rooted in Yunnan's Dali region, offers a profound representation of cultural resilience, ecological entanglement, and ancestral reverence. This folk dance is marked by its striking visual and sonic qualities: dancers wield a bamboo whip embedded with copper coins or bells, rhythmically striking their bodies in movements that align with the 24 solar terms of the agricultural calendar. The choreography mimics farming labor, animal behaviors, and cosmological patterns, weaving Bai agricultural life with ceremonial and spiritual meanings (Jiayang & Su, 2024; Xing et al., 2023). Historically, Bawangbian dance originated from a fusion of local practices, military legends, and shamanic rituals, evolving across dynastic changes and now finding expression in both folk festivals and staged performances. While it continues to thrive through community events and modern adaptations, its complexity and cultural embeddedness position it as more than a folkloric display; it is a living archive of multispecies relations, material performance, and ritual continuity (Huang, 2024; Junyou & Chantamala, 2024; Zhang & Moonswan, 2025; Zhao & Jin, 2024).

Despite its cultural richness, existing studies of Bawangbian dance often remain anchored in folklorist or heritage preservation frameworks that foreground its ethnic or national significance

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but rarely interrogate its ontological and epistemological implications in relation to the more-than-human world. Such perspectives risk overlooking the dance's material-semiotic agency and its capacity to reflect and enact non-anthropocentric worldviews (Bangstad & Pétursdóttir, 2021; Ahmadi, 2022). Posthumanism—particularly as theorized by scholars like Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad—offers tools to rethink cultural performance as an emergent process of entanglement between human bodies, nonhuman entities, and environmental forces (Andiloro, 2024; Dedeoğlu & Zampaki, 2023). These theoretical frameworks allow us to reconsider Bawangbian not as a passive cultural object but as an active site where bodily expression, ecological rhythms, and ancestral presences coalesce and communicate across species and temporalities.

This research, therefore, seeks to investigate the Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality as a posthuman cultural performance. The central research question is: How does the Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality function as a posthuman cultural performance? To answer this, the study applies qualitative ethnographic methods—drawing from interviews with performers and cultural bearers, observation of dance rituals in both rural and institutional settings, and analysis of symbolic materials, musical instrumentation, and spatial configurations. The research focuses not only on the dancers' intentionality or choreography but also on the dynamic interrelations among human participants, sacred tools like the Bawangbian whip, musical instruments, animal imagery, and the seasonal landscapes that inform the dance's rhythmic logic and cultural purpose (He & Ravn, 2018; Himberg et al., 2018). Through this lens, the dance is not only an expression of cultural memory but a communicative act within a networked ecology of meanings and materialities.

Understanding Bawangbian as a posthuman cultural performance contributes to expanding the field of posthuman studies by situating non-Western, indigenous, and embodied practices within the global discourse on more-than-human cultural production. It reveals how a traditional dance, often perceived as heritage, can serve as a medium of ecological thinking, spiritual continuity, and material affect (Adams & Weinstein, 2020; Laidlaw & Beer, 2018). It situates Bai dance within a wider conversation about how traditional knowledge systems enact posthuman worldviews long before they were named as such, and it calls for a renewed sensitivity to the cultural forms that continue to sustain multispecies relationality and embodied ecological ethics in an age of planetary crisis.

Literature Review

The evolving field of posthumanist theory offers an essential lens through which to reconsider the cultural and performative dimensions of traditional ethnic dances. Moving beyond the human-centered models of interpretation, posthumanism embraces the entanglements of body, material, environment, and multispecies co-agency. This reorientation toward the more-than-human world invites a critical reassessment of ritualistic and embodied practices that were once understood solely within the confines of heritage or nationalist frameworks. The Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality, with its dynamic interplay of material props, bodily discipline, and sacred ecological symbolism, presents fertile ground for such a reexamination. In tracing its lineage through Bai history and observing its symbolic and functional transformations in contemporary settings, this literature review aims to synthesize key scholarly dialogues around posthumanism, performance, ecology, and ethnic identity—ultimately recontextualizing Bawangbian as a site of posthuman cultural performance.

Posthumanism and the Decentering of the Human Subject

Posthumanism emerges as a response to anthropocentric worldviews, challenging the assumption that human experience alone defines culture or history. It posits a relational ontology in which human beings are not autonomous entities but participants in networks of shared agency with animals, objects, technologies, and spiritual forces. This framework disrupts the binary of nature and culture, suggesting instead that practices traditionally categorized as “folk” or “indigenous” often already presuppose such non-dualistic perspectives. In this sense, posthumanist thought aligns closely with many indigenous epistemologies that see human identity as inseparable from the land, ancestors, and cosmic rhythms. Applying this logic to the Bawangbian dance means exploring how the dance functions as a relational, rather than representational, act—one that enacts a constellation of human and nonhuman interactions in a deeply embodied form (Domanska, 2018; Howard & Küpers, 2022; Kopnina, 2019).

Performance as Affective Assemblage and Material Entanglement

Performance theory contributes to this discourse by emphasizing the performative nature of being, where identities and realities are co-constituted through bodily movement, rhythm, material, and sensation. Traditional dances are not simply symbolic or mimetic but are material enactments of complex social, ecological, and cosmological relationships. Bawangbian exemplifies this through its use of the bamboo whip, bells, copper coins, and the precise, rhythmic striking of the dancer’s body. These elements are not passive props; they become active agents in producing sonic, visual, and haptic experiences. The dance itself is an assemblage, wherein matter and motion converge to transmit ancestral memory, spiritual belief, and agricultural rhythm. Such an interpretation situates Bawangbian not merely as cultural heritage but as an ongoing posthuman event that configures meaning through affect and interaction (Giomi, 2025; Kieft, 2022; Waterman, 2019).

Ritual Dance, Ecology, and More-than-Human Agency

In many ethnic and ritual contexts, dance is deeply embedded in ecological and seasonal cycles. Bawangbian’s structure, based on the twenty-four solar terms and agricultural symbolism, foregrounds its ecological embeddedness. The movements, gestures, and accompanying music are derived not only from spiritual rituals but also from imitations of animal behavior, weather patterns, and farming gestures. This ecological performativity challenges the modernist view of art as autonomous and instead frames it as responsive to seasonal change, environmental needs, and collective survival. The dance’s function in ceremonies—both sacred and secular—reinforces its identity as a more-than-human expression, one that speaks through the land, the tools, and the body simultaneously (An et al., 2025; Del Val, 2023; Laidlaw, 2021; Yan et al., 2025).

Ethnic Dance in China and the Limits of Folkloric Frameworks

Research on ethnic dance in China has historically operated within the paradigms of folklore studies, cultural nationalism, and ethnic policy, often emphasizing heritage preservation or identity construction. While such approaches have documented important historical and sociocultural data, they have tended to treat dances like Bawangbian as static cultural expressions rather than as evolving ontological systems. The folklorization of Bai dance—particularly its use in tourism, school programs, and staged festivals—risks obscuring the entangled material, spiritual, and environmental dimensions that remain active in community-based performances. A posthuman framework offers a way to reclaim these dimensions, moving

Reframing Bawangbian as Posthuman Cultural Expression

By interpreting Bawangbian through the posthuman lens, we can begin to recognize the dance as a cultural interface where human experience is continuously shaped by—and shapes—nonhuman forces. Whether through the animate presence of the Bawangbian whip, the ancestral rhythms of the music, or the sacred geography of Dali’s landscapes, the dance enacts a situated form of knowledge that transcends individual subjectivity. It choreographs a convergence of the sacred, the social, the material, and the ecological. This study, therefore, reframes Bawangbian not as a relic of ethnic heritage but as an active posthuman performance that communicates across time, species, and elements. In doing so, it offers a meaningful contribution to the interdisciplinary exploration of embodied knowledge, ritual performance, and posthumanist aesthetics (Gemeinboeck, 2019; Woods, 2020).

Materials and Methods

The research combined immersive fieldwork with multiple forms of data collection—including semi-structured interviews, audiovisual documentation, and archival research (Fearnley, 2022; Rivero Jiménez et al., 2021) to explore the entangled relations among human performers, nonhuman props, embodied movements, ecological symbols, and sacred ritual spaces. The approach sought to identify not only cultural continuities but also the dynamic interactions between bodies, environments, and posthuman signifiers embedded in Bai traditional performance.

Field Site

The study was conducted in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. This region is the cultural heartland of the Bai ethnic group and home to both historical ritual spaces and contemporary performance venues where the Bawangbian dance continues to be practiced and performed.

Participants

The sample population consisted of four key informants and a general public group of approximately 20 participants. These were grouped into three categories as shown in Table 1.

| Group | Description | Number |
|--------------------|--|--------|
| Knowledge Group | Senior Cultural Bearers And Directors From The Bai Opera Troupe With Expertise In Bai Arts | 2 |
| Professional Group | Practicing Bai Dancers With Performance And Pedagogical Experience | 2 |
| General Public | Local Community Members Recruited Via Snowball Sampling Who Attended Festival Performances | 20 |

Table 1. Sample and Population

These informants provided multi-perspectival insights into the traditional, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of Bawangbian dance.

Data Collection Methods

The research employed the following modes of data collection as shown in Table 2.

| Method | Description |
|-------------------------|---|
| Participant Observation | Direct observation of Bawangbian dance during indoor and open-air performances, including both solo and group forms |
| In-Depth Interviews | Semi-structured interviews focused on dance techniques, cultural meaning, and personal experiences |
| Visual Documentation | High-resolution photography and video recordings captured costume details, movement techniques, and ritual settings |
| Archival Research | Examination of regional histories, music scores, costume artifacts, and previous studies to contextualize findings |

Table 2. Data Collection Methods

Special emphasis was placed on documenting the dance's relationship with musical instruments such as the dragon-headed three-stringed lute, suona, and ceremonial percussion, which serve as mediating agents in the posthuman assemblage of the performance.

Analytical Framework

All data were coded thematically using interpretive analysis. The focus was on identifying posthuman cultural signifiers, which were grouped into three major thematic categories as shown in Table 3.

| Thematic Code | Analytical Focus |
|----------------------|---|
| Body-Prop Assemblage | The interaction between dancers and objects (bamboo sticks, bells, coins) as an extended corporeal system |
| Ecological Symbolism | Representations of seasonal cycles, agricultural labor, and animal mimicry through movement and music |
| Animistic Rituality | Sacred associations with ancestor worship, local deities, and spiritual performance environments |

Table 3. Analytical Framework

Through this method, the Bawangbian dance was reinterpreted as a posthuman site of entanglement, where human intention, material expressivity, and ancestral-natural forces coalesce in a shared cultural rhythm.

Results

The Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality, deeply rooted in the ecological, spiritual, and social lifeways of Dali Prefecture, functions as a living choreography of more-than-human relations. Drawing from field observations, interviews with four key informants, and audiovisual documentation of performances, this results section presents the Bawangbian dance not simply as an aesthetic tradition but as a posthuman cultural performance. The dance mobilizes ecological symbols, embodied ancestral memory, and multispecies agency in a relational field that extends beyond the human body. Across indoor and outdoor performances, the Bawangbian whip and the dancer form a co-constitutive ecology, interwoven with land, ritual, and digital

affect. The results are organized thematically to reflect the assemblage logics that define Bawangbian's posthuman performance.

Embodied Nonhuman Agency

Central to the Bawangbian dance is the eponymous prop: a whip constructed from bamboo and adorned with copper coins and colored ribbons (Figure 1). Informants describe this whip as "not a thing we use, but something that tells us what to do." This relationship underscores the posthuman condition in which objects hold agency. As dancers strike their twelve major body joints—shoulders, elbows, knees, and ankles—the sound produced by the coins and bells does not merely accompany the movement but dictates the rhythm and intensifies the bodily focus.



Figure 1. A Whip from Bamboo Adorned with Copper Coins and Colored Ribbons

A dancer emphasized, "We listen with our skin. When the bamboo strikes and the coin rings, I know where to move next." Such statements challenge the Cartesian divide between subject and object. The whip is not a passive prop but a rhythmic guide that co-produces movement. It becomes a kinetic partner, its voice shaping the choreography, forging a cybernetic loop between body and material. The performer and the whip form a feedback system, echoing the twenty-four solar terms inscribed in the annual agricultural calendar, converting cosmological knowledge into dance.

Featuring signature moves like "Foot Hook Foot," "Double Flying Butterfly," and "The Boy Worships the Buddha," further reflect this interdependence. In "Double Flying Butterfly" (Figure 2), for instance, the dancer uses centrifugal motion to keep the whip aloft, creating visual arcs in the air. This gesture mimics insect flight while centering the whip as the motion's originator. Rather than the dancer directing the object, the whip's flight determines the dancer's positioning, resulting in a mutual choreography.



Figure 2. Double Flying Butterfly

Ecological Embeddedness

The Bawangbian dance is inseparable from its environmental setting. Many of its movements derive from agricultural labor and animal imitation, embodying a form of eco-kinesthetic literacy. For example, Figure 3 demonstrates the rice-planting motion in which dancers crouch and sway forward, arms mimicking the gesture of transplanting seedlings. An elder participant said, "This is the land teaching us. The rhythm of rice, water, sun—it all enters our bones."



Figure 3. The Rice-Planting Motion in which Dancers Crouch and Sway Forward

Similarly, dances that portray animal behavior, such as "Golden Rooster Standing" or "Dragonfly Touches Water," are more than mimicry. They reflect multispecies awareness embedded in the ecological memory of the Erhai-Cangshan region. As dancers perform in open-air venues (Figure 4), their bodies resonate with natural forces, embodying a choreography of environmental responsiveness. One informant remarked, "When we dance, it's like the land is watching. The wind joins us."



Figure 4. Dancers Perform in Open-Air Venues

The ecological motifs in Bawangbian dance demonstrate how cultural performance can operate as a site of environmental attunement and stewardship. Rather than using nature as backdrop or metaphor, the dance internalizes the temporal, rhythmic, and sensorial flows of nonhuman life into its kinetic vocabulary.

Ritual and Ancestral Continuity

Bawangbian is deeply embedded in the spiritual practices of the Bai people. Performed during ceremonies such as the Raosanling Festival and in temples like those shown in Figure 5, the dance invokes ancestral presence and divine agency. Informants consistently described Bawangbian as "a prayer, not just a performance." It is a ritual medium, translating the immaterial into gesture.



Figure 5. The Raosanling Festival and in Temples

During rituals, dancers engage in embodied offerings. Their rhythmic movements, paired with sounds from bells and coins, are believed to please local deities and ancestral spirits. As one participant explained, "Our ancestors join us when we dance. We feel them in the movement."

Ritual space itself becomes a posthuman interface, blurring boundaries between the corporeal and incorporeal. The dance grounds spiritual belief in material motion, allowing cosmic narratives to circulate through corporeal enactment. The Bawangbian dance space thus operates as a multispecies and transgenerational gathering, held together by movement, sound, and ancestral memory.

Gender and Generational Assemblages

Unlike many dance forms that privilege virtuosity, Bawangbian values interdependence. Performed by men and women of varying ages, the choreography adapts to the strengths and rhythms of each performer. In formations like "Two Dragons" and "Stars All Over the Sky," dancers move in synchronized lines or dispersed clusters, prioritizing ensemble cohesion over individual display.

This inclusivity fosters an ethics of co-becoming. A senior performer noted, "I dance slower, but the group adjusts. Young dancers learn to feel others, not just show off." The generational multiplicity generates intersubjective awareness, where dance becomes a form of kinship practice.

In interviews, dancers emphasized the importance of co-presence: "We need each other to complete the circle." This reflects a posthuman ontology in which the self is always already in relation with other humans, with materials, with unseen presences. The dance thus becomes a ritual of social and cosmic harmony, assembling diverse bodies into an ecological choreography of unity.

Posthuman Aesthetics in Modern Adaptation

The contemporary evolution of Bawangbian further highlights its posthuman nature. Increasingly, performances incorporate digital projection, theatrical lighting, and are distributed via online platforms like Douyin. These extensions do not displace the tradition but amplify its reach. One informant explained, "When we see ourselves on screen, we see how our dance travels. It becomes part of a bigger world."

Digital mediation expands Bawangbian's cultural presence while retaining its local textures. The whip still strikes in time with the land's rhythms; the costumes remain hand-sewn with regional motifs. Yet the dance now exists in hybrid temporalities—ritual past, performative present, and virtual future. Its presence in archives, short-form videos, and interactive livestreams renders it a polytemporal artifact, circulating between analog and digital, rural and urban.

Moreover, this digital turn invites new nonhuman actors—software, algorithms, screens—into the performance. The screen becomes another space for the whip to echo, another stage where the ancestral voice can be heard. The integration of media technologies into Bawangbian thus does not dilute its posthuman ontology but rather magnifies it, revealing the flexibility of tradition in adapting to new multispecies, techno-social conditions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the premise outlined in the introduction: that the Bawangbian dance of the Bai nationality, when viewed through a posthumanist lens, reveals itself not simply as cultural heritage but as an active choreography of multispecies entanglement, material agency, and ecological attunement. The field data—drawn from direct observation, interviews, and ritual documentation—validate the conceptual proposition that traditional indigenous dance practices can enact posthuman worldviews, long before such terms were theorized in Western philosophy (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Barad, 2007).

The study's results are consistent with the theoretical framework laid out in the literature review. First, the concept of embodied nonhuman agency aligns closely with Barad's (2007) notion of agential realism, wherein objects such as the Bawangbian whip are not inert props but active participants in the co-production of movement and meaning. The performers' testimonies—highlighting how the whip "tells us what to do"—demonstrate a decentering of human intentionality and foreground the dance as a relational assemblage (Giomi, 2025; Gemeinboeck, 2019). This supports the posthuman emphasis on distributed agency and confirms that cultural knowledge in the Bai community is often enacted through corporeal-material co-performances rather than cognitive instruction alone.

Secondly, the ecological embeddedness observed in the dance reflects posthuman theory's critique of anthropocentrism. The choreography's mimicry of animals and agricultural labor, along with its responsiveness to seasonal rhythms, echoes Laidlaw's (2021) and Kieft's (2022) discussions of dance as ecological practice. These findings highlight how traditional performances like Bawangbian are not merely reflections of nature but performative articulations of ecological knowledge, deeply rooted in the land and weather cycles of Dali Prefecture. As such, the results support the argument that indigenous dance traditions offer critical insights into more-than-human modes of environmental stewardship (Kopnina, 2019).

Moreover, the results relating to ritual and ancestral continuity affirm Haraway's (2016) concept of sympoiesis—the act of becoming-with ancestral, spiritual, and environmental agents. The Bawangbian dance space becomes a posthuman ritual interface, where movement, sound, and spirit coalesce to enact collective memory and sacred continuity. This dimension is often lost in folklorist or nationalist readings of ethnic dance, which treat such performances as static relics (Jiao & Zhao, 2024). Thus, this study challenges conventional heritage frameworks by demonstrating that Bawangbian is a living posthuman archive, not a museum artifact.

However, the study also reveals points of tension. The incorporation of digital technologies—video platforms, theatrical lighting, and algorithmic dissemination—raises important questions about how tradition adapts to digital ecologies. While informants embraced these changes, future research should more critically examine how techno-human entanglements might reconfigure authenticity, agency, and ritual function in such performances (Woods, 2020; Andiloro, 2024).

Future studies might undertake comparative research with other ethnic ritual dances in China or Southeast Asia to assess whether similar posthuman dynamics are at play. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track how digital mediation continues to transform embodied tradition over time. Finally, interdisciplinary collaborations with media theorists, environmental anthropologists, and indigenous scholars would further enrich understandings of posthuman aesthetics in cultural performance.

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