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The Value Logic, Functional Construction, and Practical Pathways of Minnan Nursery Rhyme Musical Theater in Cultivating Preschool Children's Sense of the Chinese National Community

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Abstract: Cultivating a sense of the Chinese national community constitutes a core issue in preschool children's ethnic unity education in the new era. However, an inherent challenge arises between the abstract ideological attributes of this concept and the concrete cognitive modes characteristic of young learners. Adopting embodied cognition theory as an analytical framework, this study proposes that fostering preschool children's sense of the Chinese national community is fundamentally a process of embodied identity construction, requiring the transformation from abstract concepts to internalized identification through concrete, perceptible cultural practices and physical co-presence. Minnan culture, as a vivid exemplar of the pattern of unity in diversity within the Chinese nation, provides tangible and perceptible ontological content for consciousness cultivation. Minnan nursery rhyme musical theater, with the richness and unity of its multimodal artistic language, constructs an immersive embodied aesthetic field. Through sonic narration, Minnan nursery rhymes sublimate local stories into the Chinese spirit, achieving a meaning transition from local experience to national identity. On this basis, the study constructs a progressive cultivation mechanism comprising shared immersion and group-based embodiment. The shared immersion stage employs joint learning and singing of Minnan nursery rhymes to achieve coordinated bodily action and emotional resonance, laying the cognitive and emotional foundation of shared belonging. The group-based embodiment stage proceeds through four phases—preparation, practice, rehearsal, and performance—realizing the embodied reproduction of community symbols and the deepening of cultural identity through homemade musical instruments, collaborative style creation, and mutual appreciation of performances. This mechanism operates on the logic of interaction ritual chain theory, transforming abstract symbols into embodied practices that preschool children can operationalize, experience, and internalize, thereby providing a theoretical reference and practical pathway for cultivating a sense of the Chinese national community in ethnic regions.

Keywords: embodied cognition; national community; musical theater; preschool education; cultural identity; interaction ritual

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1. Theoretical Foundation: An Interpretation from the Embodied Cognition Perspective

1.1. The Core Connotations of Embodied Cognition Theory

Embodied cognition is a foundational concept in contemporary research on human mental processes, proposing that higher-order thinking emerges and evolves within the sensory-motor cycle [1]. This perspective emphasizes cognition as inherently embodied action, with human thought shaped fundamentally by bodily engagement and developing in tandem with sensory-motor capacities. Conceptual structures are understood to be grounded in metaphorical mappings derived from lived bodily

experience; conceptual acquisition occurs as individuals interact continuously with their environment, repeatedly forming image schemata rooted in perceptual and motor patterns. Further theoretical development introduced the perceptual symbol system and embodied simulation, suggesting a functional correspondence between bodily movement and meaning comprehension—where cognitive processing draws upon neural mechanisms that simulate relevant sensorimotor experiences. The rise of this theoretical framework has catalyzed an embodied approach to education, challenging traditional disembodied paradigms and gaining significant traction in early childhood education. First, such an approach aligns closely with the developmental trajectory of young children's physical and cognitive growth. Within the preoperational stage of cognitive development, bodily experience constitutes the primary basis for constructing knowledge and emotional understanding: internal cognitive activity is expressed through observable physical behavior, and sensory-motor interactions serve as the medium through which action-based knowledge is acquired and internalized as stable cognitive schemata. Second, embodied pedagogical strategies support enhancements in core cognitive functions and learning efficacy. Evidence indicates that structured physical activity contributes to gains in working memory capacity, while multimodal learning environments—engaging multiple sensory channels—enable children to construct rich, integrated, and spatially coherent mental representations.

1.2. The Compatibility between Embodied Education and Cultivating a Sense of the Chinese National Community

The essence of cultivating preschool children's sense of the Chinese national community in ethnic regions lies in nurturing foundational awareness that supports early identity formation, guiding them to develop initial recognition and emotional resonance during the preschool years, thereby supporting the early emergence of this sense. Cultural psychology significantly shapes contemporary national identity and comprises surface, intermediate, and deep structural layers. Its developmental trajectory begins with emotion- and volition-oriented surface elements, progresses to value-based conceptual judgments at the intermediate level, and culminates in the deep layer—the cultural-psychological orientation—through rational integration and reflection. For preschool children, the cultural development observed in adults is mirrored through socialization; this process is explicitly reflected in the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6, which state that "children should be supported in developing understanding of their hometown, country, and ethnic background; their affection for their hometown and country should be nurtured; and their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation should be fostered." Research has examined preschool children's developmental features across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, indicating that educational approaches should be developmentally responsive: cognitively, sensory-rich experiences support conceptual grounding; emotionally, moral exemplars, intellectual engagement, and aesthetic activities help cultivate patriotic sentiment; behaviorally, children internalize principles of unity through rule awareness and guided practice in situational, role-based, and moral contexts. Thus, for preschool children, a sense of the Chinese national community is rooted less in abstract ideas and more in shared affective experience; identity recognition manifests primarily as embodied belonging, making its cultivation fundamentally a process of identity formation grounded in lived experience [2–4]. The abstract notion of the Chinese national community must be rendered accessible and meaningful through tangible, perceptible cultural practices and shared physical presence. Within such participatory, experiential activities, the abstract "we" becomes a concrete, bodily felt sense of coordination and mutual understanding—achieved primarily through two avenues: first, the revitalization and elevation of locally rooted cultural resources; second, the contextual interpretation and embodied engagement with shared national symbols.

2. Value Logic: The Unique Advantages of Minnan Nursery Rhyme Musical Theater as an Embodied Carrier

2.1. *Ontological Value: Minnan Culture as a Vivid Exemplar of the Pattern of Unity in Diversity*

Minnan culture is not an isolated local culture but a culture of migration, serving as a vivid microcosm and living testimony to the broader pattern of unity in diversity within Chinese civilization. Over eight centuries—from the Jin dynasty through the Southern Song dynasty—Central Plains cultural traditions evolved through large-scale southward population movements into the foundational cultural framework of Minnan society. As local culture encompasses all cultural resources generated by human communities inhabiting a specific region over extended historical periods, Minnan culture has developed, through sustained integration of diverse influences, into a richly layered system characterized by varied expressive forms and deep humanistic resonance. Within the structure of Chinese culture, observable manifestations coexist with underlying cultural lineages; Minnan culture, as a regional expression, reflects shared spiritual traditions and value systems common across China, anchoring its core in unity. Embodied education emphasizes recognizing and respecting children's subjectivity, enabling self-construction through sensory engagement. When preschool children are situated in the Minnan region, their cognitive development begins with concrete, localized experience; the perceptible and experiential dimensions of Minnan culture—such as language, music, gesture, and ritual—serve as accessible entry points for understanding and emotional grounding in collective identity. This constitutes an embodied cognitive pathway that naturally extends from affection for one's hometown to identification with the broader Chinese cultural community. Through its internally plural composition and its externally coherent alignment with Chinese civilizational continuity, Minnan culture offers tangible, sensorially grounded ontological content for nurturing preschool children's sense of shared cultural belonging.

2.2. *Formal Value: Minnan Nursery Rhyme Musical Theater as an Artistic Expression Field of Unity in Diversity*

Musical theater, originating in Britain, is a comprehensive art form integrating drama, dance, and music. It can create an immersive embodied artistic field for preschool children, transforming abstract concepts of shared cultural heritage into aesthetic experiences in which young learners actively participate. Musical theater is widely recognized as a dynamic form of musical storytelling; compared with other art forms, it presents cohesive narratives through flexible modes of expression, enhancing audiovisual engagement to support emotional connection. The most prominent characteristic of Minnan nursery rhyme musical theater lies in the richness of its artistic language: each artistic element—music, movement, narrative, and visual design—functions autonomously yet interdependently, contributing distinctively to an integrated, multidimensional aesthetic experience. In the auditory dimension, music conveys melodies and rhythms characteristic of the Minnan region, establishing emotional tone and atmosphere; in the motor dimension, bodily movements externalize inner states into concrete physical expressions—for example, synchronized rowing gestures symbolize coordinated action and shared purpose; in the cognitive dimension, dramatic structure provides narrative coherence, lending meaning and direction to emotions and behaviors; in the visual dimension, stage properties and scenography evoke tangible, culturally resonant Minnan environments. Minnan nursery rhymes are traditional children's songs transmitted in the Minnan dialect and serve as foundational forms of Minnan-language vocal music; they emphasize parallel phrasing and rhythmic variation, generating a sense of harmonic, cyclical sonic flow through rhyme and repetition. Thus, within multimodal narration, Minnan nursery rhyme musical theater supports deep experiential engagement, enabling young participants to internalize core thematic values embedded in storylines through situated, sensory-rich contexts. For instance, the production *Dragon Boat Racing* (Bā Lóng Chuán), developed by the GXNU Yuegang Xinghang Troupe in Fujian, integrates children's listening to regional melodies, performing synchronized movements, co-

designing stage elements, and following a four-act narrative—all converging on the central value of perseverance [5, 6]. Through this unified artistic process, preschool children develop vivid, embodied memories, clarify personal roles within collaborative settings, cultivate mutual awareness, and strengthen their identification with shared cultural traditions.

2.3. Content Value: The Sublimation Pathway from Minnan Stories to the Chinese Spirit

Chinese culture is recognized as the profound and enduring spiritual foundation of the Chinese nation, embodying its deepest collective aspirations and values; strengthening cultural identity thus serves as a vital basis for fostering social cohesion and building a shared spiritual space across diverse communities [7–9]. The spiritual essence of the sense of national community is characterized by mutual solidarity in prosperity and adversity, shared honor and responsibility, and a unified commitment to common development and destiny [10]. Chinese culture represents the integrated heritage of all ethnic groups within the country; cultivating an accurate, inclusive understanding of this cultural tradition—and achieving broad consensus around it—provides essential grounding for consolidating national unity and enhancing the nation’s cultural soft power in pursuit of comprehensive social advancement [11]. Minnan nursery rhymes, originating as oral folk traditions in the Minnan-speaking regions of Fujian Province, encode everyday practices—including domestic routines, culinary habits, recreational activities, educational approaches, and cognitive frameworks—offering rich, granular documentation of local life and reflecting underlying belief systems and ethical orientations [9]. From the perspective of music narrative theory, musical works construct meaning through sonic elements and structural patterns, generating associative imagery and emotional resonance via temporal unfolding [3, 5]. Musical narration may be conceptualized across three interrelated dimensions: the sonorous (acoustic properties), the neutral (structural syntax), and the poetic (semantic and symbolic layers); the dynamic interpretive process through which a musical work transitions from static notation to lived auditory experience constitutes its narrativity [1, 5]. As a distinct regional folk genre, Minnan nursery rhymes employ dialectal phonology as their linguistic core, with vocal delivery adhering to the principle of ‘melody following tone.’ Rhythmically, they foreground the entering tone among the four tonal categories—entering, rising, departing, and level—yielding emphatic, percussive stress points that animate sonic storytelling [5]. Melodically, they favor the *yu* mode (La-Do-Re-Mi-So-La) and *zhi* mode (So-La-Do-Re-Mi-So), establishing an affective balance between lyrical expressiveness and buoyant vitality [4]. Through this integrated system—dialect, tonal contour, rhythmic articulation, and modal inflection—Minnan nursery rhymes convey culturally specific narratives with vivid imagery and tangible detail, rendering abstract communal ideals perceptible and experiential within daily life [1]. Musical theater rooted in Minnan nursery rhymes can therefore serve as an effective medium for narrating and performing regional stories, supporting both the accurate transmission of Minnan cultural knowledge and the creative reinterpretation of its expressive forms [6].

3. Functional Construction: The Progressive Cultivation Mechanism of Collective Immersion---Group-Based Embodiment

3.1. Collective Immersion: Laying a Common Cognitive and Emotional Foundation

Shared instruction supports the development of a common cognitive orientation and emotional grounding. Socialization theory suggests that individual knowledge acquisition involves receiving external information through symbolic systems, with consciousness developing progressively through sustained input. Concurrently, linguistic and cognitive development proceed in tandem, fostering a linguistic sense of self and aligning language use with identity formation—such that learning a language entails implicit engagement with its associated cultural values, supporting identity consolidation and shared understanding. Community awareness emerges as a subjective orientation rooted in shared meaning, where participants move beyond isolated experience toward

mutual presence and co-constructed meaning. Within shared immersion, preschool children learn the same Minnan nursery rhyme under teacher guidance, clarifying its semantic and phonetic features to ensure coordinated mental representations of its auditory structure during subsequent group performance. Minnan nursery rhymes are narrative forms grounded in the Minnan language; when children jointly engage with their prosody and tonal patterns, their attention and affective responses become aligned. As they speak and sing together, vocal articulation synchronizes across participants, and bodily rhythmic actions—such as clapping or tapping—follow shared temporal structures, generating physiological attunement and multisensory readiness. This embodied coordination allows children to grasp the abstract notion of community through direct sensorimotor experience, fostering affective alignment and establishing a shared cognitive and emotional basis for inclusive identification. Interaction ritual chain theory indicates that group cohesion, heightened individual affective engagement, emergent group symbols, and shared moral orientation arise from successful coordinated interaction. The shared immersion activity functions as an initial interaction ritual: children enact synchronized vocal and physical behaviors, sustain joint attention on rhyme structure and rhythm, and experience shared enjoyment and interpersonal closeness—thereby achieving affective convergence and early group cohesion. In this context, the Minnan nursery rhyme evolves into an emergent symbol of shared participation.

3.2. Group-Based Embodiment: Deepening Identification through Collaboration and Expression

However, if the preliminary ritual experience is not consolidated, its emotional resonance and the symbolic meaning of its signs will diminish over time. The enduring power of rituals depends on their continuous, iterative reproduction, whereby participants derive a sense of shared affiliation through sustained interaction and accumulate stable emotional resources—such as confidence, vitality, and engagement—within those interactions. The Minnan nursery rhyme musical theater curriculum unfolds across three phases: interpreting cultural elements through spoken recitation, reinforcing shared understanding through choral singing, and deepening cultural identification through collaborative performance. Of these, spoken recitation and choral singing constitute collective immersion activities and form the initial phase of the interaction sequence. During collective immersion, preschool children jointly attend to the same Minnan nursery rhyme under teacher guidance; they are organized into small groups to recite the rhyme in turn while integrating bodily percussion movements to internalize its rhythmic structure. As children in each group observe and mirror one another's actions through sustained mutual attention, their absorption of the cultural and affective meanings embedded in the rhyme intensifies. Once a common cognitive and emotional foundation is established, collaborative performance serves as a pivotal ritual mechanism for transforming publicly shared knowledge into personally meaningful experience. In the preparatory phase, children—guided by the teacher—design stage props and scenic elements aligned with the narrative theme, infusing them with individualized stylistic choices while preserving thematic coherence. This process fosters emerging identification with story characters, respectful engagement with narrative symbols, and anticipatory investment in enacting the plot—all reinforced through interpersonal exchange. These dynamics generate positive feedback loops supporting the development of communal awareness, which flows directly into the practice, rehearsal, and performance phases.

During the practice phase, children in each group draw from teacher-provided materials to construct homemade Orff-style rhythm instruments, enabling them to shape distinctive performance approaches and reproduce culturally resonant symbols. The act of selecting materials, deliberating design options with peers, and determining how instruments will be used to convey expressive intent constitutes a materialization of abstract musical structures and performative conventions. For instance, when children fashion bottle caps into castanets evoking traditional Minnan rhythmic instruments, their tactile, auditory, and visual engagement becomes integral to symbol creation. The resulting bottle-cap castanets function as tangible, functional artifacts—shared tools for

performance that also embody the group's collaborative effort and serve as markers of shared identity. This making process itself enacts the embodiment and material grounding of cultural symbols. As physical carriers of group-specific meaning, such instruments establish subtle yet meaningful links to broader cultural frameworks. When children handle, display, and play these instruments, they enact care for and affirmation of the cultural expressions they have co-produced and to which they feel connected.

In the rehearsal phase, interpersonal exchange naturally incorporates each child's lived perspectives and experiential background, shaping how individuals interpret and enact roles during joint practice. Once instruments are completed, children integrate their acoustic properties with coordinated body percussion, collaboratively designing performance sequences and deciding how best to combine instrumental and physical expression to enrich musical texture. Through this process, they collectively steward and deploy the symbols they have generated to interpret a larger cultural narrative. As they personalize and express shared cultural content, heightened mutual attention and affective alignment emerge, reinforcing identification with cultural symbols through embodied participation. By positioning children as both creators and interpreters, interest in and connection to local traditions are strengthened. The satisfaction and positive affect arising from cooperative creation and expressive sharing further support the internalization of cultural meaning, contributing to durable identification with broader cultural frameworks.

The performance phase represents the culmination of the interaction sequence. Children from each group alternate between performing and observing others' presentations. Both performers and audience members participate—through distinct but complementary roles—in the shared interpretation and meaning-making around cultural symbols. This reciprocal dynamic forms a self-sustaining learning cycle, supporting the internalization of abstract cultural concepts through embodied enactment and reflective observation. For example, in the Minnan nursery rhyme musical theater production *Dragon Boat Racing*, implemented by the GXNU Yuegang-Xinghang Troupe in Fujian, preschool performers achieve role embodiment through repeated physical engagement and emotional commitment during rehearsals. As a result, values such as perseverance and cooperation—woven into the rhyme—are transformed into lived experience, facilitating deeper comprehension of the cultural significance embedded in the repertoire. At the conclusion of each performance, performers receive affirming feedback—attentive observation and enthusiastic response—from peers in the audience. This reinforcement enhances emotional energy, cultivates pride in creative contribution, and strengthens associations between cultural participation, social recognition, and personal fulfillment—thereby reinforcing motivation for continued cultural engagement. For audience members, witnessing multiple interpretations of the same narrative—though varying in instrumentation and rhythmic articulation—reinforces a shared cultural core. Repetition of key melodic motifs and narrative elements fosters resonance and cohesion, reinforcing a sense of shared affiliation. Simultaneously, exposure to diverse expressive solutions derived from common source material supports early appreciation of cultural variation and adaptive creativity—highlighting that cultural frameworks thrive through pluralistic expression and inclusive responsiveness.

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