

Sports and Heritage: A Review of the Chinese Lion Dance (*Sukan dan Warisan: Tinjauan Tarian Singa Cina*)

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ABSTRACT

The Lion Dance is a globally renowned sport and performance art that boasts a primarily Chinese constituency. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the present state of lion dance research by gathering literature from both English and Chinese contexts. The results demonstrate that there exist numerous suppositions regarding the origins and symbolic connotations of lion dance. As a sport, research on lion dance concentrates on methods to enhance athletic performance. Moreover, as a part of cultural heritage, the study of lion dance is presently transitioning from traditional research paradigms to critical heritage studies. Accordingly, we advocate for the adoption of Harrison's dialogical model (2013: 204) of heritage studies in lion dance research to reveal the significance of this captivating art form for both the present and future generations.

Keywords: *Lion dance; Heritage; Sports; Performance art; Review*

ABSTRAK

Kata kunci: Tarian singa adalah sukan dan bentuk kesenian yang diiktiraf secara global, yang juga kebanyakannya dianggotai masyarakat etnik Cina. Artikel ini menawarkan sorotan kajian yang komprehensif mengenai taraf penyelidikan semasa mengenai tarian singa, melalui ulasan literatur daripada sumber Bahasa Inggeris dan Bahasa Cina. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa terdapatnya banyak tanggapan mengenai asal-usul dan maksud simbolik tarian singa. Sebagai sebarang sukan, kajian mengenai tarian singa menentengahkan cara-cara meningkatkan pencapaian atletik. Sebagai warisan budaya pula, kajian mengenai tarian singa berevolusi daripada paradigma kajian tradisional kepada paradigma kajian warisan kritikal. Maka, kami memperjuangkan penggunaan model dialogik oleh Harrison (2013: 204) yang berfokus kepada kajian warisan kebudayaan dalam tarian singa untuk menyerlahkan signifikan bentuk kesenian yang unik ini untuk generasi kini dan akan datang.

Kata kunci: *tarian singa, warisan budaya, kesenian, sukan, ulasan*

INTRODUCTION

The lion dance is an established and popular sport and performing art that has captivated the attention of numerous scholars. As a review, we initially collated thorough discussions concerning the origins, symbolism, and variations of lion dance. Secondly, we presented the latest research breakthroughs in lion dance as a sport, with much of the primary research emanating from China. Thirdly, we examined the advancement of lion dance in heritage studies, which encompasses the research on lion dance within the established paradigm of

heritage studies and the potential for a critical research shift. Finally, we emphasized the significance of critical heritage studies for the lion dance amidst super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) and recommended the adoption of Harrison's dialogical model (2013: 204) in future research, specifically, a focus on the interaction between humans and non-human entities and the cultivation of a sustainable heritage future dialogically. It is imperative to note that this paper's scope is limited to lion dances that remain active within the Chinese community or are still prominently Chinese. Consequently, inquiries into traditional Korean lion dances (Sajonoreum) and traditional Japanese lion dances (Shishimai), for instance, surpass the ambit of this paper.

ORIGINS, SIGNIFICANCE AND TYPES OF LION DANCE

Although the lion dance is one of China's iconic rituals, the lion is not native to China. Historically, the lion first came to China during the Han Dynasty as a tribute from the West via the Silk Road. However, there is no precise answer to the question of when the lion dance originated, and significant discrepancies exist between the Chinese and English texts regarding the origin. Based on a wide range of literature, this study summarises two mainstream views on the origins of lion dance:

- (1) *Lion dance is a by-product of intercultural trade* The Han Dynasty of China established the original Silk Road over 2000 years ago, which was a vast commercial network connecting people from China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (Li & Schmerer, 2017; McBride, 2015). The trade that occurred on this road facilitated the movement of people, goods, and culture across the region. It is said that during one such trade venture, a lion was brought to China as a tribute but it ended up attacking people. In order to avoid punishment, two underlings stripped the lion's skin and wore it to pretend to be a lion. This incident is believed to have given rise to the prototype of the lion dance, a traditional Chinese dance in which performers wear lion costumes and mimic the movements of the animal. There are several accounts of this story, but it is widely acknowledged that the lion dance has its roots in the Silk Road era and has been an important part of Chinese culture ever since (Duan, 2006; Jiang, 2011).
- (2) *Lion dance is a by-product of Buddhism* This is one of the most widely accepted assertions (Gu, 2002; Lyu, 2008; Zhang, 2003) that has been posited. Buddhism was introduced into ancient China as a foreign culture since the opening of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty. Buddhist texts abound with numerous depictions of lions that significantly impacted Buddhist philosophy. As the Bodhisattva's mount, the lion is perceived by adherents of Buddhism as a divine creature endowed with supernatural powers. The first stunning demonstration of the lion dance occurred on the day of Buddha's celebration (Xing Xiang), which is chronicled in the written accounts of the Lo-Yang ch'ieh-lan chi (A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang) during the Northern Wei Dynasties. Typically, this effigy would be demonstrated and paraded on the fourth day of the fourth month, following representations of man-made beasts like 'pi-hsieh and lions' (Yang, 1984: 71). The Buddhist practice of burning incense later became more generally embraced and evolved into a Chinese cultural tradition known as *Xiang Hui* (Lyu, 2008).

Today, the symbolic meaning of the lion dance is to celebrate, entertain and express Chineseness. In this research, the lion dance has been summarized into three main functions:

- (1) *For fortune and to ward off evil spirits* The Chinese believe that the lion is majestic, powerful, brave, and is known as the 'king of animals' and regard it as a sacred object to protect and ward off evil spirits. An essential part of the lion dance is called the 'cai qing'. In Cantonese, the word 'lettuce' (shengcai) has the same sound as 'child' (shengzai), which means 'have a child'. Later on, people gave the word 'lettuce' (shengcai) a new meaning of 'being rich' (shengcai) (Jiang, 2011; Li, 2011; Tan, 2007).
- (2) *Hero worship* The lion dance is usually modelled on heroic figures such as Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei from the Three Kingdoms period. Then with elements from opera that express positive images, the lion head is dressed up with the hero's characteristics, and the corresponding character traits are described in the performance (Duan, 2006; Tan, 2007).
- (3) *Fitness and entertainment* The lion dance combines martial arts and dances through drumming and music, with props to perform various shapes and complex movements. It is both a physical and mental exercise for the performers.

Lion dances are classified into two main styles, namely northern and southern styles (Chang, 2013; Loo & Loo, 2016). The northern lion dance, which is renowned in North China, features a lion with golden, orange, and red fur that closely resembles an actual lion. Generally, northern lion dances are performed by a male and a female lion together, led by a master dressed as a warrior who heads the procession. In contrast, the southern lion dance is more elaborate, colorful, and well-liked than its northern counterpart, featuring numerous embellishments and costumes that closely resemble a real lion's appearance.

LION DANCE IN SPORTS SCIENCE

Despite the fact that lion dance competitions have recently been introduced in Malaysia after a hiatus since the 1980s, contemporary research on lion dance within Sports Science is mainly of Chinese origin. The principal justification for this is that over a dozen sports colleges within China already provide lion dance courses, and an established competition system has been developed for hundreds of national competitions (Zhang, 2008).

In Malaysia, the introduction of lion dance competitions has brought about changes to the traditional lion dance. The need to tailor the dance to suit competition requirements has resulted in the merging of southern and northern lion dances, as well as the creation of new competition sets (Loo & Loo, 2016). China was influenced by Malaysia and, in 1995, established the Chinese Dragon and Lion Dance Sports Association, which held the first-ever Dragon and Lion Dance National Championship (Xue & Wang, 2013). Reviewing lion dance competitions over the past 30 years, Xue & Wang (2013) observed that the development of lion dance has been characterized by an emphasis on innovative movement choreography, an improvement in the standard of basic motions, and an enhancement of artistic performance. Lei (2007) suggested that enhancing the artistic expression of athletes is crucial for improving the performance of lion dance sports. Accordingly, training programs should be designed to strengthen athletes' stage awareness, physical quality, and artistic appreciation.

Ma & Lei (2014) have provided a more detailed account of competitive lion dance, which comprises 2D planar techniques and 3D stereoscopic techniques. The former includes basic movements of lion dance and mannerisms embodied through the lion, while the latter incorporates advanced techniques such as lion dances in the air, jumping, leaping, and shaping. The demand for superior performances in competitive lion dance has led to research efforts in other fields. Duan et al. (2010), for example, studied the changes in athletes' heart rates during set training sessions. They found that athletes in the lion's head position consistently had higher

heart rates than those in the lion's tail position, suggesting that different training methods should be developed based on athletes' positioning and their heart rate responses. Liu (2018) developed an algorithm to monitor and enhance the stability of landing following the implementation of motion, while other studies have focused on blood indicators for lion dance practice (Fan, 2010) and the development and innovation of lion dance equipment (Chang & Shen, 2013).

The development of lion dance sports has stimulated some scholars to ponder the idea of incorporating lion dance education into school curricula, particularly at higher education levels (Chen et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2012; Ma & Zuo, 2009; Xu et al., 2017; Zhang, 2008). With authorities encouraging students of all ages to learn traditional and ethnic sports, lion dance and wushu have been granted the opportunity to be included in the school curriculum (Gao et al., 2012). Zhang (2008) emphasized that the symbolic spirit embodied in the lion dance is crucial for the mental health and character development of students. Both Gao et al. (2012) and Ma & Zuo (2009) found that China's university students possess enough enthusiasm to learn lion dance and that there are sufficient conditions to promote its uptake in more universities.

LION DANCE IN HERITAGE STUDIES

Since 2006, China has recognized 32 traditional lion dances as a national intangible cultural heritage, while Malaysia listed the lion dance as a national cultural heritage in 2007 (Rodzi et al., 2013), and Chinese communities in many other countries preserve and promote lion dance as a cultural tradition. In this section, the study of lion dance heritage is divided into the study of 'objects' and the study of 'individuals'. This categorisation is based on a paradigm shift in heritage studies, which emphasises reflexivity and critical thinking in research. Rather than solely focusing on technical questions related to preservation, heritage researchers are now examining the broader social, political, and cultural implications of heritage preservation. This shift acknowledges that heritage is not only about preserving objects or traditions but also about understanding the significance of these traditions for individuals and communities and how they contribute to shaping cultural identities and narratives (Havinga et al., 2020).

STUDIES ON THE LION DANCE ITSELF

Numerous scholars have delved into the question of what precisely the lion dance entails. Li & Long (2016) conducted a historical investigation into the *Wu Pi Xiu*, a traditional lion dance in Wuchuan City of Guangdong Province, and posited that the origins of the lion dance in this region trace back to the Southern Song Dynasty. Li et al. (2021) attributed the roots of the Hakka lion dance in Meizhou City of Guangdong Province to both external and internal factors, contending that the Hakka lion dance was an extension of the dependence on court lion dances from the Han Dynasty while also drawing heavily on Hakka martial arts and Buddhist folkloric traditions. Matusky & Tan (2017) noted that the lion dance has a lengthy history in Malaysia, brought over by Chinese immigrants in the 19th century, particularly those from Guangdong Province. Early lion dance associations in Malaysia served as hubs for working-class Chinese individuals and young educated Chinese people to socialize and cultivate skills (Tan, 1989). Chang (2013) observed that during the 1800s, when there was a significant influx of Southern Chinese migrants to the United States, Southern lion dances appeared in Chinese-dense areas such as California, Hawaii, and New York. The lion dance in the United States has now assumed a new character, thanks to the involvement of Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese and Singapore and Malaysia's influence in the lion head's design and choreography. Slovenz (1987)

provided a comprehensive account of how the lion dance is performed, with similar studies undertaken in other works (Huang et al., 2008; Su, 2007; Zheng & Hu, 2017). Some scholars are committed to exploring how to preserve the lion dance. Lian (2017) studied the inheritance model of the *Qing Lion Dance* in Jieyang, Guangdong, while Gao (2021) responded to the preservation and heritage of *Nuo Lion Dance* in Hunan Province.

In a study on lion dance production and commercialization, Tian & Li (2021) argued that preserving the traditional lion dance in modern society requires attention to both its economic and cultural worth. Zeng et al.(2013) analyzed the sociocultural context behind the Lingnan lion image's development, different types of lion images, stylistic and decorative features, as well as the present state of design applications. Additionally, it is crucial not to limit oneself to the expression of skills but to explore multiple forms and channels for self-expression (Wang, 2017).

STUDIES ON INDIVIDUALS

The lion dance is regarded as a confluence of individual and social interactions. According to Xie (2020) socio-historical inquiry into the Foshan lion dance, social movements exerted a profound influence on the interpretation and dissemination of this performing art. The transmission of the Foshan lion dance transpired in two phases: from 1949 to 1976, it shifted from an overt and public form to a suppressed and clandestine one due to significant changes in the political and social fabric. Nevertheless, the legacy of this practice survived despite external interventions with the custodians of this tradition during that epoch. It highlighted that although the cultural sustainability of the lion dance is largely reliant on socio-cultural mores, the inheritors cannot be overlooked. This view is corroborated by Wang et al.(2016) and Wu & Wu (2020). Wang et al.(2016) posited that the Tianyang Lion Dance underwent a transformation due to varying degrees of individualism, ethnicity, sub-groups, local government, and national demand, driven by different motivations and interests. Wu & Wu (2020) argued that the lion dance was based on the political, economic, and social infrastructure of the market, government, and local community. However, the integration of the state and the market as providers of space for the lion dance led to the alienation of lion dancers, techniques, and organizations from the local community, thereby raising the issue of the variability of the lion dance.

The lion dance holds significant importance as a symbol of identity in overseas Chinese communities, often reflecting a multifaceted Chinese identity. In Canada, the lion dance was reorganized and reintegrated to construct a new collective identity that unified individuals of Chinese descent from various regions and dialects (Li, 2017). Traditional authenticity was not deliberately emphasized or promoted; rather, localized trivialization was employed to express a multivocal Chinese identity (Li, 2017). Similarly, in New Zealand, lion dance was used to negotiate and construct Chinese cultural identity. A study conducted by Johnson (2005) highlighted how students regarded lion dance as an expression of their tradition, heritage, and collective cultural identity. The performance of lion dance facilitated the coming together of students from diverse Chinese backgrounds, helping them form a shared identity. In the United States, critical research has focused on the bodily subjectivity of lion dance. The vibrant props and costumes associated with performing the lion dance are used to shift the audience's focus from the performer to the captivating lion. Such innovative settings enable performers to express their self-awareness and voice the intentions of their group or class. For example, Avaunt (2021) suggested that the symbolism and theatricality of the lion neutralize hypersexualized and racialized notions of bodily permeability regarding Asian American

women bodies. Feminism, concealed behind the costume, influences the technical practice and shapes a new form of lion dance in Boston's Chinatown. This illustrates that compared to other performing arts, the appearance of lion dance can easily conceal the performer's intentions, even during periods of acute social conflict. Lion dance provides an opportunity for performers to express their voices and engage in a dialogue with the audience. In this process, the lion dance, as a living entity, undergoes continuous recreation to match social-ecological conditions. Avaunt (2022) also examined female lion dance troupe 'Gund Kwok' to explore the concept of 'sisterhood'. The study argued that the female-only troupe and its sisterhood ideology articulate Chinese American cultural identity beyond the framework of Western cultural traditions and the patriarchal nature of the dance itself.

In Southeast Asia, the lion dance is widely recognized as a platform for multi-ethnic interaction and an essential component of national culture. In Myanmar, street lion dance created a temporary communal space that fostered trust and friendship-building between individuals from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (Roberts, 2011). The annual lion dance competition held on the streets represented a tentative step towards cross-cultural interaction and understanding in Myanmar (Roberts, 2013). In Malaysia, during the last century, when ethnic awareness was on the rise (Mahyuddin, 2011), lion dance was chosen as a traditional cultural emblem to resist national assimilation and promote cultural revival (Tan, 2007). In the national culture debates of the 1980s, Malaysian Chinese called for the preservation and acceptance of lion dance as part of Malaysian culture (Carstens, 1999). However, Malaysian lion dance gradually transcended ethnic boundaries and became a shared cultural practice for promoting national unity. Loo & Loo (2016) noted that lion dance troupes incorporated the concept of national unity by allowing non-Chinese members to participate and by blending Malay and Indian rhythms and instrumentation into their performances

NEW TREND: CONNECTIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN LION DANCE STUDIES

Heritage researchers' approach to action has undergone a significant shift, from an unwavering commitment to preserving cultural heritage in its original form to a focus on the present and future, where people's demand for 'using' heritage determines and creates heritage resources without constraints (Ashworth, 2011). This shift signifies a transition from an objective orientation, which prioritizes tangible heritage preservation and protection, to a subjective orientation, which emphasizes the use and development of heritage in response to human needs. Thus, heritage is viewed as a 'cultural creation of the present', where people constantly imagine 'new pasts' to meet their changing needs.

However, heritage studies are undergoing a new paradigm shift from heritagization paradigm to critical heritage studies. Critical heritage researchers argued that 'heritagization' has led to a 'distortion between heritage and place' and has affected the authenticity and sustainability of heritage (Ahmed, 2008). In response to the challenges posed by heritagization, critical heritage researchers see heritage as a process of cultural practices constructed by multiple groups, where heritage values are not naturally generated and self-evident, but are artificially assigned by different heritage subjects (Smith, 2011). Heritage is not just a tangible, static, material object, but an intangible, dynamic, spiritual, discursively constructed 'landscape', a process of practice, an act of communication and an act of making meaning for the present in which all groups participate (Smith, 2006) which echoed Samuel's (1994: 303) emphasis on the role of heritage as a social process in promoting social diversity. Critical heritage studies therefore advocate the use of heritage as a pathway for interaction with other

diverse and relevant fields, rather than just studying heritage for the sake of studying heritage or critiquing existing heritage studies and practices (Winter, 2013). At the same time, critical heritage studies have also moved on from heritage to global issues such as sustainable development, international relations and cultural conflicts, in order to understand and explain the common problems facing all of humanity in today's world through the lens of heritage (Winter, 2013).

From the above sections, we can see that although there is a scientific materialist paradigm for lion dance (mainly focused on sports science), most of the research focuses on the heritage studies of preservationism, conservationism and heritagization paradigms. There also have some scholars who attempt to explain social inequality (Avaunt, 2021, 2022) and social diversity (Loo & Loo, 2016; Roberts, 2011, 2013) through the discursive shift in lion dance studies. But the above analysis does not give an adequate theoretical explanation of the role played by the 'lion dance' as a materiality in society. Meanwhile, the excessive obsession with representational politics and knowledge/power has not only neglected the material emotional quality and dynamism of heritage but has also lost sight of the social processes and globalisation that surround it (Harrison, 2013: 113), especially in super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007).

The concept of super-diversity highlights the unprecedented complexity and diversity found in plural societies. In such societies, individuals have multiple identity options, which poses a challenge to heritage studies as cultural traditions become more varied and vague (Koch, 2009). Fixed ethnic boundaries have also started to blur (Lobo, 2010), leading to difficulties in classifying individuals and ethnicities (Aspinall, 2009; Song, 2009). Super-diversity raises a serious issue for lion dance research, particularly that of representation. Traditionally, lion dance was associated with a single ethnic Chinese narrative and served as a 'differencing machine' (Harrison, 2013: 140). However, super-diversity fundamentally questions how society functions at all levels, from interpersonal communication to global structures (Blommaert, 2013: 6), and changes our understanding of identity categories (Meer, 2014: 144).

In this new social context, how does lion dance represent increasingly blurred and interacting community groups, and what impact do these groups have on society's character and construction? This calls into question the traditional concept of lion dance and aligns with Samuel's (1994: 303) view of heritage as an ongoing process. We believe that heritage derives its meaning from complex present-day interactions, and the value of lion dance is dynamic and adaptable. In Malaysia and Singapore, where diversity is considered a national asset, lion dance may serve as a tool for creating collective social memory in a modernised 'united Malaysian nation' (Shamsul, 1996: 328). Although such memories may simply maintain respect and camaraderie among different cultures without necessarily requiring one another to be fully acquainted (Lee, 2017).

To this end, we call for a break with the long-standing dichotomy between subjectivism and objectivism (Bourdieu, 1973) that has led to a mutual fragmentation of nature and culture in heritage studies (Harrison, 2013: 206). This requires the establishment of a total social science on lion dance research (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 26) and bringing the affective character of heritage 'things' back more directly to critical heritage research (Harrison, 2013: 113). Specifically, it entails a connectivity ontology and seeing heritage as a medium for dialogue between people and nature (Harrison, 2013: 229), namely, a linkage points that span a gamut of social interactions (Chan & Khalid, 2020), not only focusing on the substantive impact of lion dance on people and the environment, but also on the way it is practised in everyday lives, in order to better link it to social, economic and political issues.

CONCLUSION

Lion dance has undergone a transformation from its initial ceremonial origins to encompass a diverse range of social functions. As a sport, the scholarly debate has centred around improving competition performance through various means, including but not limited to meeting movement requirements, revising competition rules, and designing training programmes and educational schemes. Of course, greater attention has been paid to the study of lion dance as a heritage. The popularity of lion dance across various regions and countries has given rise to a plethora of distinct styles of the tradition. Ethnographic and historical research has thus been employed by scholars to explicate the essence of lion dance and address the question of how best to protect it. As heritage studies discourse has evolved, researchers have increasingly shifted their focus towards the people involved in lion dance. Whilst some academics still pursue a connection with the past through lion dance, others have begun to explore the present, pointing out that lion dance is a living embodiment of local culture, imbued with meaning for everyday life, and capable of generating new values. Nonetheless, a general concern for representation is insufficient when it comes to addressing the crisis faced by lion dance within super-diversity. To this end, we call for the implementation of the dialogical model (Harrison, 2013: 204) of heritage studies in lion dance research, which emphasises interactions, connections, and dialogues between objects, places, practices and people, which hold the key to nurturing sustainable heritage futures.

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