

Cultural Significance in the Performance Process of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD)

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ABSTRACT

The Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) is a distinctive dragon dance tradition practiced in Zhongyi Village, Yixian County, Hebei Province, China. While previous studies have primarily focused on its historical development, transmission, and heritage preservation, limited attention has been given to the cultural meanings embedded in its performance practices. Drawing upon an ethnochoreological perspective, this study examines how cultural meanings are created, communicated, and sustained through the interconnected stages of Caijie (Festive Street Parade) and Liaochang (Entering the Arena). The research is based on qualitative fieldwork involving participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions, photography, and video documentation. The findings demonstrate that DLCAPFD functions as more than a traditional festive performance. Meaning is constructed through the interaction of movement, music, spatial organization, symbolic character formations, and collective participation. The formation of auspicious phrases such as Tian Xia Tai Ping (Peace under Heaven), Zheng Da Guang Ming (Fair and Upright), and Long Nian Da Ji (Auspicious Dragon Year) transforms movement into a medium of embodied cultural communication through which values of harmony, prosperity, moral integrity, and communal well-being are expressed. The study further shows that collective coordination among performers and musicians reinforces social cohesion, cultural memory, and shared community belonging. By analysing the relationship between performance process and cultural meaning, this study argues that DLCAPFD functions as a form of embodied cultural communication in which movement, music, spatial organization, and collective participation work together to create and transmit collective cultural values. The study contributes to ethnochoreological scholarship by demonstrating how traditional performance practices operate as systems of cultural transmission that sustain collective identity and cultural continuity within contemporary society.

Keywords: Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD); Ethnochoreology; Embodied Cultural Communication; Performance Process; Intangible Cultural Heritage

INTRODUCTION

Traditional performance practices constitute an important component of intangible cultural heritage, serving as cultural systems through which communities express values, transmit knowledge, and construct collective identities. Beyond their aesthetic functions, traditional performances often operate as meaning-making practices that embody cultural memory, social relationships, and shared worldviews. As living cultural practices, they provide important insights into how communities interpret and reproduce meaning across generations. Consequently, the study of traditional performance extends beyond the analysis of movement and spectacle to encompass the broader social and cultural processes through which shared understandings are created and transmitted.

Within Chinese culture, dragon dance represents one of the most recognizable and symbolically significant forms of traditional performance. Historically associated with prosperity, harmony, authority, and collective blessing, dragon dance has long played an important role in religious ceremonies, seasonal festivals, and communal celebrations. Through its integration of movement, music, symbolism, and public participation, dragon dance functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural practice through which communities express collective aspirations and reinforce social cohesion (Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng bianjibu, 1989; Zhou, 2009). Across different regions of China, numerous variations of dragon dance have emerged, reflecting diverse historical experiences, local traditions, and cultural contexts.

Among these regional traditions, the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) of Zhongyi Village, Yixian County, Hebei Province, represents a particularly distinctive form of dragon dance. Unlike conventional dragon dances that emphasize acrobatic display and continuous movement, DLCAPFD is characterized by its ability to form auspicious Chinese characters through the coordinated manipulation of a segmented dragon body. Through carefully organized choreography, performers construct phrases such as “Tian Xia Tai Ping” (天下太平, Peace in the World) and “Zheng Da Guang Ming” (正大光明, Fair and Upright), transforming movement into a visual medium of cultural expression. The integration of textual formation, collective movement, musical accompaniment, and spatial organization distinguishes DLCAPFD from other dragon dance traditions and highlights its unique cultural significance.

Although DLCAPFD has attracted scholarly attention because of its historical significance and unique performance form, research has largely focused on its historical development, transmission, and heritage preservation. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding the cultural significance embedded within the performance process itself.

This study therefore examines the cultural significance embedded within the performance process of DLCAPFD. Drawing upon an ethnochoreological perspective, it analyzes how movement, music, spatial organization, character formation, and collective participation interact to generate and communicate cultural values and meanings. Particular attention is given to understanding performance not simply as a sequence of movements, but as a process through which cultural values are embodied and communicated within local social life.

More importantly, this study argues that DLCAPFD can be understood as a form of embodied cultural communication. Rather than functioning solely as a traditional festive activity or a heritage object, the performance operates as a cultural medium through which meanings are physically created, expressed, and transmitted. Through the interaction of bodily movement, symbolic character formations, and collective participation, cultural values such as harmony, moral order, prosperity, and collective belonging become visible and socially meaningful.

By advancing this perspective, the study contributes conceptually to discussions in ethnochoreology and intangible cultural heritage studies. It demonstrates how traditional performance practices function not only as artistic expressions but also as embodied systems of cultural communication through which communities sustain cultural continuity and shared social identity in contemporary society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dragon dance has long been recognized as one of the most important forms of Chinese traditional performance. As one of the most enduring forms of Chinese folk dance, it occupies an important position within the historical development of Chinese dance traditions (Wang, 2012). Beyond its function as public entertainment, dragon dance is closely associated with cultural symbolism, communal celebration, ritual practice, and collective identity. Scholars have noted that dragon performances historically served social and symbolic purposes, reflecting beliefs related to prosperity, harmony, protection, and auspicious fortune (Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng bianjibu, 1989; Zhou, 2009). Through the integration of movement, music, and visual symbolism, dragon dance functions as a cultural practice through which communities express shared values and collective aspirations. Existing studies on dragon dance have mainly focused on

several interconnected themes, including historical origins, regional variations, ritual functions, movement structures, and forms of cultural expression. Together, these studies suggest that dragon dance should be understood not only as a performative activity but also as a social practice embedded within local traditions and community life.

Historical development and heritage preservation of DLCAPFD

Research on DLCAPFD has primarily examined its historical development and heritage preservation. Historical studies generally agree that the origins of DLCAPFD are closely associated with the royal tomb culture of the Qing Dynasty and the tomb-guarding system of the Western Qing Tombs (Chen, 2000; Zhou, 2009). During the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, the expansion of the mausoleum system contributed to the development of a distinctive dragon dance tradition in which performers used the dragon body to form Chinese characters and auspicious phrases (Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng bianjibu, 1989; Liu, 2001). Scholars have also documented how the dragon body gradually evolved from twelve to thirteen sections, with character formations becoming an important feature that distinguished DLCAPFD from other dragon dance traditions.

Existing studies further suggest that the social functions of DLCAPFD changed across different historical periods. During the Qing Dynasty, performances were closely associated with ritual activities, sacrificial ceremonies, and celebrations connected to the tomb-guarding system (Zhao, 2015; Zhang & Li, 2020). Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, former tomb guards gradually became ordinary villagers, and DLCAPFD shifted from a court-related activity to a community-based folk tradition. As a result, the performance increasingly participated in inter-village exchanges, festival celebrations, and communal activities, acquiring broader artistic and social functions within local society (Yan, 2010; Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng bianjibu, 1989). These studies demonstrate the adaptability of DLCAPFD and its ability to survive within changing political and social environments.

More recent scholarship has focused on the transmission and safeguarding of DLCAPFD within the framework of intangible cultural heritage preservation. Studies emphasize the importance of community-based transmission through master-apprentice relationships, family continuation, collective training, and regular performance activities (Zhao, 2015). Recent oral-history research further indicates that DLCAPFD currently faces both challenges and opportunities in relation to cultural transmission, community participation, and heritage preservation (Ma & Zhang, 2025). Government support, documentation projects, and heritage initiatives have also contributed significantly to the protection of DLCAPFD following its inclusion in the Hebei Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006 and the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2008 (Li & Yin, 2018; Zhang & Li, 2020). In addition, scholars argue that universities can contribute to research, education, artistic innovation, and public awareness, thereby supporting the long-term sustainability of the tradition (Li & Xu, 2016).

Performance organization and character formation of DLCAPFD

Research has also examined the performance organization and character formation of DLCAPFD. Existing studies indicate that the performance follows relatively stable organizational procedures. Traditionally, rehearsals begin during the twelfth lunar month, while major performances take place during Spring Festival celebrations and Chuhui activities (Li & Yin, 2018; Zhang & Li, 2020). During these events, performers used the dragon body to form auspicious phrases such as Tian Xia Tai Ping (Peace under Heaven) and Zheng Da Guang Ming (Fair and Upright), expressing blessings and reinforcing social relationships within and between communities. Scholars further emphasize the collective nature of the performance, noting that DLCAPFD depends upon close coordination among performers who control different sections of the dragon body (Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng bianjibu, 1989; Zhou, 2009). Such organization enables performers to maintain continuity and cooperation throughout the performance process.

Studies have also documented specific movement patterns and technical features used during performance. Existing research identifies movement characteristics such as Daoba hand-switching techniques and circular stepping patterns, suggesting that these movements mainly support character construction and maintain spatial

continuity during performance (Zhonghua wudao zhi bianji weiyuanhui, 2014). In addition, scholars note that performers require extensive training to construct Chinese characters accurately during movement transitions. Different auspicious phrases may also be selected according to specific social contexts, including official events, temple fairs, and inter-village celebrations (Zhang, 2014).

Through the integration of movement, spatial arrangement, and written language, DLCAPFD combines bodily performance with the expression of blessings, ritual relationships, and shared values. Existing studies suggest that the construction of Chinese characters represents one of the most distinctive features of DLCAPFD and forms an important part of its overall performance structure.

Performance and cultural meaning theories

The relationship between performance and cultural meaning has received considerable attention within dance and performance studies. Within ethnochoreology, scholars argue that dance should be understood not simply as physical movement but as a cultural system through which movement, music, space, and social interaction collectively generate meanings. Kaeppler (2000) suggests that dance functions as a form of cultural knowledge and communication, while Giurchescu and Torp (1991) emphasize that dance practices are closely related to broader social structures and collective values. From this perspective, the significance of a dance tradition lies not only in its choreographic forms but also in the meanings created through performance processes.

Similar ideas can also be found within symbolic and performance studies. Geertz (1973) argues that culture consists of systems of symbols through which people communicate and interpret shared understandings of the world. Likewise, Turner (1982) views performance as a form of social and cultural expression in which meanings are publicly enacted and experienced. Through participation and observation, performances create spaces where values, social relationships, and collective memories are represented and reinforced.

These theoretical perspectives provide an important foundation for understanding DLCAPFD. Rather than viewing the performance simply as a sequence of movements or a fixed heritage form, they suggest that movement, music, spatial organization, and character formation can be understood as interconnected elements through which cultural meanings are created and communicated during performance.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Despite the growing body of scholarship on DLCAPFD, existing studies have mainly focused on its historical development, heritage preservation, performance organization, and movement characteristics. Previous research has provided valuable documentation of the origins, transmission methods, ritual functions, and structural features of the tradition. However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how meanings are created, communicated, and sustained through the performance process itself.

Existing studies have documented movement patterns, character formations, and organizational procedures (Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng bianjibu, 1989; Zhonghua wudao zhi bianji weiyuanhui, 2014; Zhou, 2009), while research on transmission and heritage safeguarding has emphasized issues of continuity and preservation (Zhao, 2015; Li & Xu, 2016; Ma & Zhang, 2025). However, limited attention has been given to the relationship among movement, music, spatial organization, character formation, and collective participation as interconnected processes through which cultural meanings are communicated during performance.

This study addresses this gap by examining DLCAPFD from an ethnochoreological perspective and by understanding the performance as a form of embodied cultural communication. Rather than treating performance as a fixed heritage object or a sequence of movements alone, this study explores how bodily movement, music, spatial organization, and collective participation work together to create and transmit cultural meanings. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader understanding of traditional performance as a cultural communication process through which communities sustain cultural continuity and collective identity in contemporary society.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand how meanings are created, experienced, and interpreted within specific social and cultural contexts. This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the cultural significance embedded within the performance process of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD). Given that DLCAPFD is a living traditional performance practice and an officially recognized form of intangible cultural heritage, a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for exploring the meanings, values, and cultural knowledge embedded within performance activities.

The study adopts an ethnochoreological perspective, which views dance not merely as physical movement but as a cultural system through which communities express social values, identity, and collective memory (Kaeppler, 2000; Giurchescu & Torp, 1991). Rather than focusing solely on choreographic structures, this perspective examines how movement, music, spatial organization, symbolic formations, and community participation function collectively within performance processes. Ethnochoreology is grounded in anthropology, ethnography, and performance studies and emphasizes the study of dance within its social and cultural context rather than as an isolated artistic form (Kaeppler, 1972; Buckland, 2001, 2020; Grau & Jordan, 2000). Accordingly, this methodological approach is designed to examine how meanings are embedded and expressed within the performance process of DLCAPFD.

Data were collected through three phases of fieldwork conducted between January 2023 and September 2025 in Zhongyi Village, Yixian County, Hebei Province, the traditional home of DLCAPFD. Primary data consisted of participant observation, performance documentation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Purposive sampling was adopted to select participants who had direct experience and knowledge of DLCAPFD. A total of seven key informants participated in in-depth interviews, including inheritors, organizers, experienced performers, local cultural workers, and community members. In addition, four focus groups involving inheritors, core performers, general performers, cultural workers, and local supporters were organized to obtain perspectives from different participant roles.

Observational data focused on performance procedures, movement patterns, character formations, musical accompaniment, performer interactions, and audience participation. Particular attention was given to how these elements interact to produce cultural meanings associated with harmony, prosperity, social cohesion, cultural continuity, and community identity. Observations were recorded through video documentation, photography, field notes, and reflective notes written immediately after field activities. Performance activities before, during, and after each event were documented to ensure continuity of observation. The collected data were analysed using thematic interpretation informed by ethnochoreological principles. Data analysis followed a process of repeated review and comparison of interview transcripts, observation notes, visual materials, and field records. Initial codes were identified from recurring topics and patterns and were later organized into broader themes related to movement and choreography, spatial organization, symbolic formations, and collective participation.

By combining field observation, interview data, and performance analysis, this methodological approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of DLCAPFD as both a structured performance practice and a cultural activity embedded within community life. The use of multiple sources of evidence also strengthened the consistency and credibility of the findings through data triangulation.

RESULTS

The findings are organized according to the major stages of the DLCAPFD performance process observed in Zhongyi Village. Analysis focuses on the performance setting, musical organization, character formation system, auspicious phrase formations, concluding sequences, and audience interaction. Together, these elements reveal the structural characteristics of the performance and provide the empirical basis for examining its cultural significance.

Performance Setting and Community Context

The performance process of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) observed in Zhongyi Village on 28 May 2024 consisted of two interconnected stages: Caijie (Festive Street Parade) and Liaochang (Entering the Arena). These two forms represent the basic performance structure of the tradition and remain central to contemporary demonstrations of DLCAPFD.

Historically, the most important annual performance period for DLCAPFD occurred during the Zouhui activities associated with the Chinese Spring Festival. Preparations traditionally began during the winter months, when villagers were assembled for collective rehearsals in anticipation of performances scheduled for the first lunar month. Beginning on the fourth day of the lunar new year, the performance troupe travelled within Zhongyi Village and to neighbouring communities, conducting demonstrations and participating in local celebratory activities.

The field performance observed for this study was organised as a research demonstration coordinated by local cultural authorities and community practitioners. Although it was not conducted during the traditional festival season, the performance retained the principal components of the DLCAPFD tradition. Activities took place in village streets and public open spaces, allowing observation of both the parade and arena performance stages.

The Caijie stage involved twenty-four participants, including fourteen dragon dancers, seven musicians, and three ceremonial personnel. Prior to the procession, participants assembled in a village alleyway for final preparations before proceeding through the village according to an established performance order. The structured arrangement of performers, musicians, and ceremonial personnel reflected the collective organization required for the successful execution of the performance and highlighted the communal character of the tradition.

At the front of the procession were ceremonial personnel carrying yellow team flags, followed by the accompanying band. Two performers carrying troupe flags preceded the dragon ball dancer, who led the dragon section. Behind the dragon ball performer, thirteen dragon body segments were carried by individual dancers to form the complete dragon structure (Figure 1).



Figure 1: DLCAPFD performance procession at the beginning of the Caijie performance (Photo by Liu Yutong - assistant researcher).

Guided by the dragon ball holder, the troupe proceeded through the village streets using an “S-shaped Formation” while musicians performed the musical piece *Caijie*. During the procession, performers raised and lowered the dragon body while advancing along the designated route (Figure 2).



Figure 2: DLCAPFD's *Caijie* performance, where performers dance in "S-shaped Formation" through the streets (Photo by Liu Yutong - assistant researcher).

Upon completing the village procession, the troupe proceeded to the Cultural Square near the entrance of Zhongyi Village, where the Liaochang performance was conducted. The transition from village streets to the public square marked a shift from mobile procession to a more formalized performance setting, bringing performers and spectators together within a shared communal space. The movement of the procession through village streets served more than a logistical function. By traversing public spaces before entering the performance arena, the *Caijie* stage increased the visibility of the performance and announced the commencement of the subsequent Liaochang activities. The procession therefore functioned as a transitional phase that linked everyday village life with the more structured and ceremonial components of the performance.

Musical Structure and Performance Coordination

Following the completion of the *Caijie* procession, the performers assembled at the Cultural Square to begin the Liaochang stage of the performance. Several villagers gathered around the performance area as preparations for the arena performance were completed. The gathering of spectators around the performance area marked the transition from the preparatory stage to a public performance setting in which performers and audience members occupied a shared communal space.

The Liaochang process began with the performance of the musical piece *Toutong*. The accompanying ensemble was led by inheritor Liu Baoqi on the drum and supported by seven musicians playing large cymbals, small cymbals, and gongs. During this introductory segment, the dragon performers entered the performance area and prepared for the commencement of the dance.

Toutong functioned as the opening musical segment of the arena performance. According to local practice, it served to establish rhythm and coordinate the transition from procession to formal performance. The musical structure was moderate in tempo and generally lasted approximately five minutes.

Immediately after *Toutong*, the ensemble transitioned into the musical piece *Ertong*. This musical segment accompanied the official entry of the dragon dancers into the arena and marked the beginning of the main performance sequence. Unlike *Toutong*, which functioned primarily as an introduction, *Ertong* accompanied the movement of performers and provided rhythmic coordination throughout the arena performance. The continuous percussion patterns supported synchronization among performers and facilitated the orderly progression of subsequent formations.

The musical structure provided a framework through which performers coordinated movement transitions and formation changes. Percussion signals from the drum, cymbals, and gongs guided the timing of movements and facilitated synchronization among performers throughout the performance. The close integration of music and movement demonstrates the importance of the accompanying ensemble in organizing the performance process and ensuring the orderly progression of character formations.

Character Formation System: Tian Xia Tai Ping

Following the transition into the musical piece Dragon Dance, the main choreographic sequence commenced. According to local practice, Dragon Dance serves as the principal musical accompaniment for the character formation sequences and is performed at a faster tempo than the preceding musical sections. Guided by dragon ball holder Zheng Qingkun, the troupe entered the performance area using Circular Steps and S-shaped movement pathways before beginning the process of character formation. Throughout the performance, the dragon ball holder served as the principal coordinator of movement transitions and formation changes, directing the positioning of the dragon body during both movement sequences and character construction. Upon completion of each character formation, performers collectively vocalized the pronunciation of the character before resuming movement.

The first character formed was *Tian* (Heaven). Following a gong signal, the dragon ball holder raised the dragon ball and moved to the side of the arena while performers coordinated the dragon body segments to construct the character (Figure 3). Before the formation was completed, the dragon tail performer moved around the outer edge of the character and used the dragon tail segment to finalize the structure. After completion, the formation remained stationary for approximately thirty seconds before another gong signal instructed performers to dissolve the formation and resume movement.



Figure 3: Formation of the Chinese auspicious phrase *Tian* (Heaven) in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

The troupe subsequently formed *Xia* (Under) using a similar performance procedure. Movement transitions were executed through Figure-Eight pathways before the dragon body was rearranged to produce the character (Figure 4). After a brief display, the formation was dissolved and the troupe returned to its running sequence.



Figure 4: Formation of the Chinese auspicious phrase *Xia* (Under) in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

The third character formed was *Tai* (Great), which was constructed at the centre of the performance space through coordinated positioning of the dragon segments (Figure 5). During the formation process, the dragon ball was incorporated into the character structure as part of the completed visual arrangement. As with the previous formations, the completed character was briefly displayed before the performers resumed movement around the arena.



Figure 5: Formation of the Chinese auspicious phrase *Tai* (Great) in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

The final character was *Ping* (Peace), completing the four-character phrase *Tian Xia Tai Ping* (Peace under Heaven) (Figure 6). Upon completion of the final character, the troupe completed the vocalization sequence before continuing to the next phase of the performance.



Figure 6: Formation of the Chinese auspicious phrase *Ping* (Peace) in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

Throughout this sequence, movement transitions, musical accompaniment, gong signals, and coordinated manipulation of the dragon body operated together to facilitate the orderly formation of the four-character phrase. Rather than functioning as isolated formations, the four characters were performed sequentially to produce the complete phrase *Tian Xia Tai Ping*. The progression from one character to the next required continuous movement transitions, spatial reorganization, and collective repositioning of the dragon body. The successful execution of the phrase therefore depended not only on individual skill but also on the coordinated actions of the entire troupe, highlighting the collective nature of the performance process.

Unlike conventional dragon dance performances where movement itself constitutes the primary visual focus, DLCAPFD employs movement as a mechanism for producing written symbols. The dragon body therefore functions simultaneously as a choreographic object and a medium for textual representation. This transformation of the dragon body into written language creates a unique intersection between performance, calligraphy, and symbolic communication, distinguishing DLCAPFD from many other regional dragon dance

traditions in China. Through collective coordination, performers transform the dragon into a medium capable of producing written language within physical space.

Auspicious Phrase Formations

Following the completion of Tian Xia Tai Ping, the performance continued with the formation of additional auspicious phrases. Using the same performance structure of movement transitions, gong signals, character construction, and stationary display, performers sequentially formed the phrase Zheng Da Guang Ming (Fair and Upright). The four characters were constructed individually through coordinated manipulation of the dragon body and displayed within the arena before being dissolved and replaced by the next character (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Formation of the Chinese auspicious phrase *Zheng Da Guang Ming* (Fair and Upright) in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

The troupe subsequently performed *Long Nian Da Ji* (Auspicious Dragon Year). As with previous formations, performers utilised coordinated body positioning and movement transitions to construct each character (Figure 8). According to local practice, the content of auspicious phrases may be adjusted according to specific occasions and zodiac years. During the Year of the Dragon, *Long Nian Da Ji* was selected as an appropriate celebratory phrase, while alternative phrases may be used in other years. This flexibility allows the performance to respond to changing social and cultural contexts while maintaining its established choreographic framework.



Figure 8: Formation of the Chinese auspicious phrase *Long Nian Da Ji* (Auspicious Dragon Year) in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

Throughout these formations, the dragon body functioned as the principal medium through which Chinese characters were visually constructed and displayed within the performance space. While the choreographic structure remained largely consistent across different phrases, the content of the formations could be adapted

according to festival themes, cultural occasions, or zodiac years. The use of auspicious expressions such as Zheng Da Guang Ming and Long Nian Da Ji therefore demonstrates both the continuity and flexibility of the performance tradition, allowing DLCAPFD to preserve established choreographic practices while remaining relevant to contemporary cultural contexts.

Closing Formation

After completing the sequence of auspicious phrase formations, the troupe entered the final stage of the performance. Performers resumed movement around the arena in an S-shaped formation before transitioning into the concluding poses.

The first concluding posture was the “Fish Lying on the Sky” formation, during which performers elevated the dragon body to create a continuous undulating visual effect. Following this transitional display, dragon ball holder Zheng Qingkun guided the troupe toward the centre of the arena.

The performance concluded with the Dragon-shaped Pillar formation. All performers simultaneously raised and coiled the dragon body into a stationary vertical structure, producing the final visual image of the performance (Figure 9). This marked the formal completion of the Liaochang process.



Figure 9: Formation of the “Dragon-shaped pillar” pose in the DLCAPFD performance of Zhongyi Village (Photo by author Zhao Cong).

The concluding formations differed from the character-based sequences that preceded them. Rather than constructing written phrases, these final postures emphasized the visual presence and symbolic form of the dragon itself. The transition from textual formations to symbolic dragon imagery provided a structured conclusion to the performance and marked the completion of the choreographic sequence.

Performance and Audience Interaction

Audience participation formed an important component of the DLCAPFD performance process. Although the observed performance was conducted as a research demonstration rather than during the traditional Spring Festival season, several villagers gathered around the Cultural Square to observe the Liaochang performance. Throughout the performance, spectators remained attentive as the dragon dancers constructed successive character formations and auspicious phrases. The public display of Tian Xia Tai Ping, Zheng Da Guang Ming, and Long Nian Da Ji enabled audiences to observe the visual transformation of the dragon body into recognizable Chinese characters and phrases.

The gathering of spectators around the performance area reflected the public nature of the event. As the performance progressed, audience members observed the formation sequences, musical accompaniment, and movement transitions that characterized the DLCAPFD tradition. The interaction between performers and spectators occurred within a shared performance space, where the visual display of character formations formed a central focus of audience attention.

The observed performance lasted approximately thirty minutes and encompassed both the Caijie and Liaochang stages. Field observations indicated that successful performance depended upon the coordinated participation of performers, musicians, inheritors, and supporting personnel. Despite the relatively limited number of spectators present during the research demonstration, the performance provided a complete representation of the contemporary practice of DLCAPFD in Zhongyi Village.

DISCUSSION

Cultural Significance Of The Dlcapfd Performance Process

DLCAPFD as embodied cultural communication

The findings demonstrate that the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) functions as more than a traditional festive performance. Rather than serving solely as entertainment, the performance process operates as a cultural system through which shared values, social relationships, and collective understandings are communicated and maintained. The integration of movement, music, spatial organization, character formation, and communal participation transforms the performance into a process of embodied cultural communication that connects performers, local communities, and broader Chinese cultural traditions.

From an ethnochoreological perspective, DLCAPFD should be understood not merely as a sequence of choreographic movements but as a cultural practice in which movement, music, space, and social interaction work together to create meaning. Ethnochoreological scholarship suggests that dance reflects and reproduces social values and cultural knowledge within particular communities (Kaeppeler, 2000; Giurchescu & Torp, 1991; Buckland, 2001). Previous studies of dance traditions have often emphasized movement as a reflection of cultural values and social structures. The present findings further suggest that, in DLCAPFD, cultural ideas are not only represented through movement but are also actively communicated through the interaction between performers, musicians, symbolic formations, and community participants. Similar observations have also been reported in ethnographic dance studies beyond the Chinese context, where movement practices are understood as important means through which communities transmit social knowledge and maintain collective relationships (Sklar, 2000).

From an interpretive perspective, the performance process can also be understood as a form of symbolic expression. Geertz (1973) argues that culture consists of systems of symbols through which people communicate and interpret their social world. In DLCAPFD, meaning is communicated primarily through coordinated movement and visual forms rather than spoken language. The dragon body, Chinese character formations, ritualized movement patterns, and the transition from Caijie to Liaochang together create a visible framework through which cultural values are expressed. Rather than simply presenting auspicious words, the performance transforms abstract ideas such as harmony, prosperity, and collective well-being into shared experiences that can be seen and physically enacted.

Character formation and symbolic meaning

The production of cultural meanings within DLCAPFD is therefore not confined to performers alone. Cultural meanings emerge through the interaction between performance and audience interpretation. The successful communication of auspicious phrases depends upon the ability of spectators to recognize, understand, and respond to the symbolic formations presented before them. The performance thus becomes a shared cultural event in which meanings are collectively constructed through participation and observation. This process suggests that performance is not a one-way act of expression but a social interaction through which performers and audiences participate in the creation of shared understandings.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of DLCAPFD is its transformation of movement into visual text. Unlike most dragon dance traditions that emphasize acrobatic display and continuous movement, DLCAPFD employs the dragon body to construct recognizable Chinese characters and auspicious phrases. Through collective coordination, performers transform the dragon body into a medium capable of producing written

language within physical space. Rather than functioning simply as visual display, the character formations create a close relationship between movement, language, and cultural communication. As Kaeppler (2000) argues, movement systems may function as cultural knowledge systems through which meanings are organized and transmitted. In DLCAPFD, the dragon body becomes an embodied medium through which abstract cultural values are transformed into visible forms. This characteristic distinguishes DLCAPFD from many other dragon dance traditions and demonstrates how bodily action can communicate meanings beyond verbal language.

The formation of auspicious phrases further strengthens the ritual and communicative dimensions of the performance. Expressions such as Tian Xia Tai Ping (Peace under Heaven), Zheng Da Guang Ming (Fair and Upright), and Long Nian Da Ji (Auspicious Dragon Year) communicate values associated with harmony, moral order, prosperity, and collective well-being within Chinese culture. However, the use of performance as a medium for expressing collective values is not unique to DLCAPFD. Ethnographic studies in different cultural settings have similarly shown that ritual performances often transform social ideas into publicly shared actions and experiences (Turner, 1982; Buckland, 1999). Similar processes can be observed in community dances and ritual performances in other societies, where movement functions not only as artistic expression but also as a way of reinforcing shared beliefs and social relationships. Compared with these studies, DLCAPFD demonstrates a distinctive feature by integrating bodily movement with the visual formation of written language, thereby extending the communicative role of performance beyond movement itself.

Collective participation and performance space

The findings also highlight the importance of collective coordination as a mechanism for reinforcing social cohesion. Successful execution of the performance requires precise synchronization among musicians, the dragon ball holder, and dragon dancers. Individual performers control only a single segment of the dragon body, making the successful formation of characters dependent upon cooperation and collective discipline. From an ethnochoreological perspective, this coordinated action represents more than technical choreography. It reflects what Giurchescu and Torp (1991) identify as the relationship between dance structure and social structure, whereby performance organization mirrors broader patterns of social interaction and collective cooperation within the community. Similar observations have been made in studies of Chinese folk marching performances, where organizational structures and coordinated movement serve not merely technical functions but also reinforce collective participation and communal solidarity (Liu, 2022). The organization of performance space further strengthens this collective dimension. The movement from village streets during Caijie to the formal arena of Liaochang transforms everyday public space into a shared cultural setting. Through movement, music, and collective gathering, familiar spaces temporarily become sites where cultural meanings are experienced and negotiated (Mabingo, 2021; Whatley, 2022). Similar observations have been reported in ethnographic studies outside the Chinese context, where dance and ritual performances create temporary spaces for social interaction and collective engagement (Buckland, 1999). Rather than functioning only as a physical setting, performance space becomes part of the process through which social relationships and shared understandings are reinforced.

The symbolic significance of the dragon provides another important dimension of meaning. Within Chinese cultural traditions, the dragon has long been associated with prosperity, protection, authority, harmony, and good fortune. Throughout the performance, the dragon serves not only as a choreographic object but also as a powerful cultural symbol that connects contemporary participants to broader historical traditions. The ability of the dragon body to transform into auspicious characters further expands its symbolic role, allowing it to function simultaneously as a ritual symbol, performance medium, and vehicle of cultural communication. This symbolic process is closely connected to the transmission of cultural memory. According to Assmann (2011), cultural memory is sustained through repeated symbolic practices that maintain links between communities and their past. In DLCAPFD, cultural knowledge is not preserved only through written records but also through repeated bodily practice. Performers learn movement patterns, character formations, and performance procedures through participation and observation. As Felföldi (1999) and Nahachewsky (1995) suggest, dance practices often function as important means through which communities preserve and reproduce cultural knowledge across generations. Therefore, the repeated performance of DLCAPFD serves not only to maintain

movement traditions but also to reinforce shared cultural memory within the community.

The continued performance of DLCAPFD also contributes to the construction of local community identity. As a distinctive cultural tradition associated with Zhongyi Village, the performance provides community members with a shared cultural reference point that distinguishes the locality from surrounding communities. Participation in performance activities and recognition of their historical significance strengthen feelings of belonging and reinforce connections between individuals, community life, and cultural heritage. However, compared with broader ethnographic studies, the present findings suggest that community identity is not maintained solely through preserving traditional forms. Instead, identity is continuously reproduced through repeated participation, collective experience, and the social interactions generated during performance activities. This observation further supports the argument that traditional performances should be understood not as static cultural objects but as ongoing social processes through which communities actively create and maintain shared identities.

Cultural continuity and adaptation

The repetitive structure of DLCAPFD reflects the continuity of traditional cultural practice across changing social contexts. Hobsbawm (1983) argues that traditions create connections between past and present through repeated practices and shared forms of action. Although contemporary performances take place under social conditions different from those of earlier generations, the repeated use of established movement patterns, musical structures, and character formations allows participants to maintain meaningful connections with inherited cultural traditions. This observation is also consistent with ethnographic studies beyond China, which suggest that traditional performances often preserve core structures while adapting to changing social circumstances. The continued performance of DLCAPFD therefore demonstrates that cultural continuity does not depend upon rigid preservation but rather upon the ability of traditions to maintain recognizable forms while responding to new contexts.

At the same time, the performance also demonstrates the adaptability of traditional cultural practices within contemporary society. The inclusion of phrases such as Long Nian Da Ji illustrates the capacity of DLCAPFD to respond to specific social and temporal contexts while maintaining its overall performance structure. Rather than functioning as a fixed cultural form, DLCAPFD operates as a living performance practice that continuously adjusts to changing community needs and social environments. This adaptability contributes to the continued relevance of the tradition and supports its role as a living form of intangible cultural heritage rather than a static relic of the past.

Implications for heritage and performance studies

The findings also provide broader implications for discussions of traditional performance and heritage studies. Since its recognition as provincial and national intangible cultural heritage, DLCAPFD has received increased institutional support and public visibility. However, the present findings suggest that the significance of safeguarding traditional performance extends beyond preserving performance forms alone. As Smith (2006) argues, heritage should be understood as a cultural process through which societies assign meaning and value to traditions. Similarly, UNESCO (2003) emphasizes that intangible cultural heritage is continuously recreated by communities rather than preserved as a fixed object.

In this study, DLCAPFD is understood as a form of embodied cultural communication. This perspective extends beyond approaches that view traditional performance primarily as heritage documentation or artistic expression. Instead, it highlights how movement, participation, and symbolic action work together to create and communicate cultural meanings. As Foley (2015) observes, safeguarding traditional performance requires attention not only to performance forms but also to the social and cultural contexts that give those forms meaning.

Concluding discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that the cultural significance of DLCAPFD extends beyond the symbolic

meanings of individual phrases or formations. Cultural meanings emerge through the interaction of movement, music, spatial organization, collective participation, and symbolic representation. Viewed from an ethnochoreological perspective, DLCAPFD demonstrates how traditional performance can function as a system of embodied cultural communication through which communities create, express, and sustain shared meanings. Through this process, performance becomes not only a form of artistic expression but also an important medium through which cultural continuity is maintained within contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the cultural significance of the performance process of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) in Zhongyi Village through an ethnochoreological perspective. By analysing the interconnected stages of Caijie and Liaochang, the study demonstrates that the significance of DLCAPFD extends beyond its visible choreographic formations and auspicious phrases. Cultural meaning is produced through the dynamic interaction of movement, music, spatial organization, symbolic representation, and collective participation throughout the performance process.

The findings reveal that DLCAPFD functions as a form of embodied cultural communication through which traditional values, communal aspirations, and cultural knowledge are expressed and transmitted. The formation of auspicious phrases such as Tian Xia Tai Ping, Zheng Da Guang Ming, and Long Nian Da Ji transforms movement into a symbolic medium capable of communicating ideals of harmony, prosperity, moral integrity, and collective well-being. At the same time, the coordinated actions of performers, musicians, and community participants reinforce social cohesion and contribute to the preservation of local cultural identity.

Rather than understanding DLCAPFD solely as a festive activity or a form of intangible cultural heritage, this study suggests that it can also be understood as a cultural communication system in which bodily movement, symbolic formations, and social interaction work together to create and sustain shared meanings. Through repeated performance practices, cultural knowledge and values continue to be transmitted and maintained within community life. This perspective extends current discussions in ethnochoreology by highlighting the relationship between embodied practice and cultural communication.

Despite contemporary challenges, including changing social conditions and declining participation among younger generations, DLCAPFD continues to serve as an important expression of local cultural heritage. Its continued practice demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of traditional performance within modern society. More broadly, this study highlights the importance of examining traditional performance as a meaningful cultural process through which communities communicate values, maintain cultural continuity, and sustain collective identity across generations.

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