

Literacy Preservation of Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese Schools

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ABSTRACT

Qi Lin Lantern Dance is a traditional Chinese cultural practice involving elaborate lantern displays and dance performances. The objective is to investigate the strategies used for literacy preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools. The study was conducted in Chinese schools, incorporating formal and informal interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. Four key informants, including cultural experts and educators, provided insights into the cultural and educational aspects of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance. Data analysis involved thematic coding and triangulation of multiple data sources. The research results indicate a positive correlation between Qi Lin Lantern Dance preservation and enhanced literacy skills among students, emphasizing the role of cultural engagement in educational practices. Suggestions include integrating cultural practices into school curricula, promoting cultural awareness, and fostering cultural sustainability by preserving intangible cultural heritage.

Key words: Lantern Dance, Cultural Preservation, Literacy Development, Chinese Schools, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage preservation within educational systems has emerged as pivotal in fostering holistic literacy preservation among students worldwide. This imperative is particularly pronounced in nations like China, where ancient traditions and practices are integral to the national identity (Ogden, 2016; Rieckmann, 2018). Among these traditions, the Qi Lin Lantern Dance stands out as a captivating cultural heritage artifact that symbolizes artistic expression and serves as a conduit for transmitting cultural values and nurturing holistic development. Against the backdrop of globalization and modernization, the preservation of such intangible cultural heritage has garnered increasing attention, prompting educators and policymakers to explore its potential impact on literacy development within Chinese schools (Chang & Frederiksen, 2016; Keun, 2017; Li et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2024).

The rich tapestry of Chinese culture encompasses many traditional practices, each carrying its unique significance and historical narrative. The Qi Lin Lantern Dance, deeply entrenched in Chinese folklore and history, represents a vibrant example of cultural heritage that has endured the test of time (Zhu & Maags, 2020; Weisgrau et al., 2023). Originating from the Sichuan province, this dance form embodies a fusion of artistic expression, historical narratives, and community identity. However, despite its cultural richness and historical significance, there is a looming threat

of cultural erosion due to rapid societal transformations and changing educational priorities (Campbell, 2017; Teoh, 2017). As such, the preservation and promotion of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance within the educational framework have become imperative not only for safeguarding cultural heritage but also for enhancing holistic literacy development among students (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Howard, 2016; Oktingrum et al., 2016; Lin & Lian, 2018).

The primary research problem addressed in this study pertains to understanding the holistic literacy development outcomes associated with preserving and practicing the Qi Lin Lantern Dance within Chinese schools. As educational institutions grapple with the challenges of balancing modern educational paradigms with cultural preservation efforts, there is a need to empirically investigate the efficacy of integrating traditional cultural practices into the curriculum (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2023; Zhang & Bhengsi, 2024). This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring the multifaceted impact of cultural preservation initiatives, specifically focusing on the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, on students' literacy skills, cultural awareness, and overall development within the Chinese educational context (Chen et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2023; Chen & Sensai, 2024).

The objective of this study is to investigate holistic literacy development through the preservation of Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools. By conducting a comprehensive examination of the interplay between cultural heritage preservation and literacy development, this study aims to

contribute valuable insights to educational stakeholders, policymakers, and practitioners (Barthel-Bouchier, 2016; Fatorić & Seekamp, 2017). The findings of this research are expected to shed light on the role of traditional cultural practices in contemporary educational settings, inform pedagogical strategies, and promote a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and heritage among students. Ultimately, the significance of this study lies in its potential to inform evidence-based educational practices, promote cultural sustainability, and enrich the educational experiences of students in Chinese schools.

Research Questions

1. How does the preservation of Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools contribute to holistic literacy development, cultural awareness, and a sense of identity among students?
2. What are the specific strategies and outcomes of integrating Qi Lin Lantern Dance into educational settings in Luocheng?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of Chinese schools, the preservation of traditional cultural practices like the Qi Lin Lantern Dance serves as a rich cultural resource that contributes to students' literacy development. This literature review delves into four key theoretical perspectives to explore how the preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools can lead to holistic literacy development among students.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory emphasizes the role of cultural artifacts and practices in shaping individuals' cognitive development and learning processes. Within the Chinese educational landscape, the preservation of traditional cultural practices like the Qi Lin Lantern Dance aligns with principles by providing students with meaningful cultural experiences that enhance their literacy skills and cognitive abilities. By engaging in cultural activities embedded in their heritage, students develop a deeper understanding of language, history, and societal norms, contributing to their overall literacy development (Sannino & Engeström, 2018; Matthews & López, 2019).

Socio-Cultural Theory

Socio-cultural theory, rooted in the work of Vygotsky, underscores the importance of social interactions and cultural tools in cognitive development. The preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools fosters socio-cultural interactions among students, leading to collaborative learning experiences and cultural immersion. Through participation in cultural practices, students acquire language, literacy, and cognitive skills within authentic cultural contexts, promoting holistic literacy development and cultural awareness (Panhwar et al., 2016; Xu & Stahl, 2023).

Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability advocates for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage across generations. By integrating Qi Lin Lantern Dance preservation into Chinese schools, educators contribute to cultural sustainability by ensuring that students have access to their cultural roots. This fosters a sense of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity, which are integral to holistic development. Cultural sustainability initiatives within educational settings play a crucial role in nurturing students' cultural literacy and fostering a deeper appreciation for their heritage (Barthel-Bouchier, 2016; Warwick, 2016).

Holistic Development

Holistic development theories highlight the interconnectedness of cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural dimensions of learning. The preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance promotes holistic development by providing students with opportunities for self-expression, cultural exploration, and identity formation. Through engagement with cultural practices, students develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and intercultural competence, enhancing their overall literacy development and contributing to their holistic growth as individuals (McBride, 2016; Bamicha & Drigas, 2022).

METHOD

Selection of Key Informants

Selecting key informants is crucial for gaining in-depth insights into the preservation and transmission of the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern Dance. This section outlines the criteria used to select four key informants and provides details about the chosen transmitters involved in the study, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Key informants for luocheng Qi Lin lantern dance

Criteria	Details
Selection Criteria	Key informants were chosen based on their expertise, experience, contributions to the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, and influence in the field.
Years of Experience	All key informants have more than 20 years of experience in working with the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, showcasing their deep understanding and knowledge of its cultural significance.
Understanding of Cultural Context	Key informants possess a comprehensive understanding of the cultural background and development of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Luocheng, providing valuable insights into its evolution.
Contributions and Influence	Chosen informants have made significant contributions to the transmission, development, and preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, gaining recognition and influence in the cultural sphere.

Selection of Research Site

The selection of a research site plays a crucial role in conducting a comprehensive study on cultural preservation and its impact on literacy development within educational settings. This section outlines the scope of the research site for investigating holistic literacy development through the preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools, as shown in Table 2.

Research Tools and Steps

Selecting appropriate research tools and methodologies is crucial for investigating holistic literacy development through the preservation of Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools. This section outlines the research tools and steps used in the study to gather data and insights effectively, as shown in Table 3.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis employs thematic analysis techniques. This approach involves systematically organizing and interpreting data gathered from formal and informal interviews, observations, and focus group discussions with key informants such as Qi Lin Lantern Dance transmitters, teachers, and cultural center staff. The analysis will focus on identifying recurring themes, patterns, and perspectives related to the cultural significance, educational impact, and challenges faced in preserving and transmitting Qi Lin Lantern Dance within Chinese school environments.

RESULTS

The results provide valuable insights into the holistic literacy development achieved through the preservation of Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Chinese schools. The study outcome sheds light on how this traditional art form contributes to students’

overall literacy skills, cultural awareness, and sense of identity, offering a comprehensive understanding of the impact of cultural preservation on holistic education within the Chinese school context.

The Historical Literacy Development of Qi Lin Lantern Dance

The research delves into the historical source and development process of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance in Luocheng, providing valuable insights into its cultural evolution and significance. Originating from an ancient animal-like dance rooted in people’s worship of the Qi Lin, this dance symbolizes peace, auspice, wealth, and protection from evil, reflecting prevalent beliefs and practices in Chinese culture. Its connection to farming activities underscores the dance’s role in expressing hopes for good weather and bountiful harvests. Initially a court art during the Tang Dynasty, the Qi Lin Lantern Dance gradually transitioned to become a widely spread folk dance art by the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty. This evolution traces back to the migration of Hakka people to Luocheng, Sichuan, after which the dance integrated elements of Sichuan opera and local folk customs, further enriching its cultural and artistic value. While debates persist regarding specific timelines and locations, the Qi Lin Lantern Dance’s enduring history and cultural significance remain undisputed, highlighting its deep-rooted place in Chinese heritage, shown in Figure 1.

Development of Luocheng Qi Lin lantern dance with sichuan elements

The Qi Lin lantern dance has a rich history, tracing its origins to ancient times when it symbolized prosperity, protection, and peace, rooted in the Yellow River basin of the Central

Table 2. Scope of research site

Criteria	Details
Research Site	Luocheng County, Leshan City, Sichuan Province
Rationale	Luocheng County chosen due to its rich cultural heritage, particularly in the preservation and practice of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, which is unique to the Sichuan area
Cultural Group	Qi Ling Deng; Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern Dance Group
Group Description	The Qi Lin Lantern Dance group: a professional cultural troupe with a long history of preserving and performing the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, comprising experienced artists and a dedicated fan base
Researchers' Positionality	The researchers have a personal connection to this cultural event, having been fans since childhood and attending numerous performances, which fuels the motivation for researching this cultural phenomenon

Table 3. Research tools and steps

Research Tool	Description
Formal Interview	Conducted formal interviews with provincial transmitters of the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance to gather detailed insights and perspectives.
Informal Interview	Engaged in informal interviews with key informants involved in the preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, gaining personal and nuanced perspectives
Observation	Actively participated in and observed the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance, recording personal experiences and observations to understand cultural nuances and practices
Non-Participatory Observation	Observed performances of the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance through various media such as CDs, videos, books, and papers, providing additional insights into the art form
Focus Group	Formed a focus group consisting of individuals with rich experience in teaching and performing Qi Lin Lantern dance, as well as cultural center staff involved in related research

Plains. The migration of Hakka ancestors contributed significantly to its spread and amalgamation with local dance traditions, leading to the development of the contemporary Qi Lin Lantern dance. This evolution was particularly pronounced in southern China, where Hakka migrations played a pivotal role in its dissemination. The dance’s distinctive characteristics, including prop design, musical accompaniment, and performance style, still echo its ancient roots in the Yellow River basin. Over centuries, as Hakka people migrated to various regions, the Qi Lin lantern dance traveled with them, adapting to local cultures while retaining its essential features.

Preservation and transmission efforts of Luocheng Qi Lin lantern dance

Despite facing challenges such as the Anti-Japanese War and the Cultural Revolution, the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance persevered through grassroots efforts and community passion. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, the dance underwent a phase of “natural transmission,” reflecting the deep-seated affection and engagement of Luocheng locals with this cultural heritage. This informal transmission, devoid of structured groups or designated transmitters, highlighted the organic and heartfelt connection people had with the Qi Lin lantern dance. However, the Cultural Revolution posed a significant threat, causing a hiatus in its practice. It was through the dedication of individuals like transmitter Li Zhonglie that the dance survived and experienced a resurgence. Li Zhonglie’s commitment to passing down the dance, coupled with the support of policies protecting intangible cultural heritage, revitalized the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance.

The contemporary iteration of the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance reflects a harmonious blend of tradition and adaptation. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and changing cultural preferences, efforts to preserve and promote this dance form have been fruitful. Today, the Luocheng Qi Lin Lantern dance stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of cultural heritage, embodying not just artistic expression but also the collective memory and identity of the community.

Artistic creation and crafting of Qi Lin lantern dance props in luocheng

The Qi Lin lantern dance in Luocheng, Sichuan, is a unique and captivating spectacle that showcases the intricate

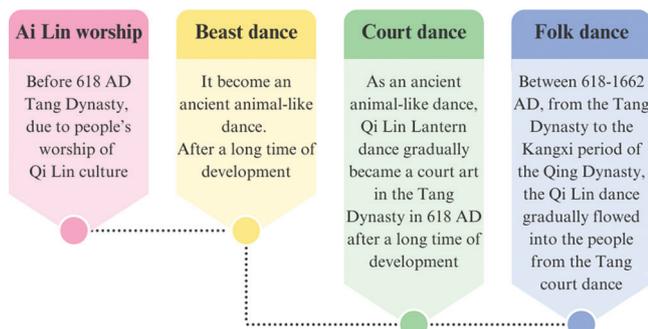


Figure 1. The illustrates the development process
Source: Kun He, from fieldwork in June 2023

production process and exquisite props that embody the essence of Qi Lin imagery. The dance involves two actors, one handling the head and the other wearing the tail, creating a dynamic and captivating spectacle. Wang Liansheng, a prominent transmitter of Qi Lin lantern dance traditions, has led significant innovations in prop design since 1997. The Qi Lin head, the focal point of the dance, consists of various animal features, including eyes, eyebrows, nose, ears, cheeks, lips, teeth, tongue, hair, beard, forehead, jaw, horns, and tentacles. The design incorporates elements like the lion’s nose, tiger’s mouth, cow’s ears, goldfish’s eyes, unicorn’s horns, and horse’s sideburns, blending these attributes seamlessly to capture the essence of Qi Lin mythology.

In the realm of Qi Lin lantern dance, significant advancements have been made in the materials used for crafting clothing, particularly in the creation of the Qi Lin face. Traditionally, the Qi Lin face was fashioned from paper, employing multiple layers to achieve a thickness of about 1 cm and a weight of approximately 40 to 50 kilograms. However, to enhance performance dynamics and reduce weight, modern adaptations have shifted towards utilizing fabric layers instead. This transformation involves applying 5 to 6 layers of fabric onto dry abrasives, resulting in a lighter yet durable Qi Lin face. The new approach involves stripping away external decorations and the lower jaw, focusing on core structural integrity while maintaining artistic authenticity. Additionally, the choice of fabric color is meticulously curated to align with Qi Lin’s gender characteristics: red for male Qi Lin, blue green for female Qi Lin, and blue for young Qi Lin. Upon completion of fabric layering, meticulous detailing and corrections are carried out to finalize the Qi Lin face, marking a significant evolution in costume material and design within the Qi Lin lantern dance tradition, as shown in Figure 2.

The preservation of the Qi Lin lantern dance in Luocheng

The Luocheng community has been actively involved in the preservation and promotion of the Qi Lin lantern dance, fostering a sense of ownership and cultural preservation. This has resulted in performances at large festivals and cultural events, showcasing the rich heritage of the dance. The Qi Lin lantern dance is prominently displayed during traditional festivals, particularly the Spring Festival, which attracts migrant workers and elderly residents. The vibrant atmosphere, characterized by the rhythmic beats of gongs and drums, attracts locals, tourists, and onlookers from neighboring cities.



Figure 2. The Qi Lin head model
Source: Kun He, from fieldwork in June 2023

The Qi Lin lantern dance has also been represented in intangible cultural heritage tours and performances across Sichuan Province and national platforms. These engagements promote awareness and understanding of the dance, allowing it to thrive within the cultural heritage landscape. The dance is also a regular feature at large-scale government events, such as cultural festivals and Spring Festival celebrations, contributing to the cultural vibrancy of Luocheng. However, commercial performance opportunities for the Sichuan Luocheng Qi Lin lantern dance remain limited due to logistical challenges such as the need for a sizable cast. Despite these challenges, the growing recognition and appeal of Luocheng's Qi Lin lantern dance beyond traditional settings continues to grow.

Qi Lin lantern dance preservation in school settings

Qi Lin lantern dance preservation initiatives are being implemented in Luocheng's educational institutions, including middle schools, primary schools, and kindergartens, to integrate the traditional art form into the curriculum and extracurricular activities. These efforts aim to foster cultural awareness and literacy among students. Since 2018, Luocheng Middle School has made significant strides in nurturing young talents and preserving this traditional art form. Under the guidance of Qi Lin lantern dance transmitters like Mr. Li Zhonglie and Mr. Zhang Hongjie, the school has trained professional teachers in Qi Lin lantern dance instruction and involved students in learning and performing the dance. Mr. Hu Tao, a dedicated physical education teacher at Luocheng Middle School, has emerged as a key figure in the preservation and transmission of the Luocheng Qi Lin lantern dance. Each year, Luocheng Middle School selects promising students for intensive training, ensuring the continuity and proficiency of Qi Lin lantern dance performances within the school community.

Qi Lin lantern dance preservation in primary school

At Luocheng Central Primary School, the preservation of Qi Lin lantern dance intertwines with daily activities, particularly during recess. These recess exercises not only introduce students to the traditional Qi Lin lantern dance of Luocheng but also incorporate essential cultural elements. By immersing children in their national culture from an early age, the school aims to cultivate a deep appreciation for traditional heritage among students.

The integration of Qi Lin lantern dance into primary school education serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it facilitates the transmission of China's rich cultural traditions, instilling a sense of pride and connection to their cultural roots. Additionally, this integration enhances the overall quality of primary education by fostering positive emotions and a sense of cultural identity among students. Through these initiatives, students gain a deeper understanding of folk culture, contributing to their holistic literacy development and cultural awareness, as shown in Figure 3.

Qi Lin lantern dance preservation in middle school

In Luocheng, schools are actively preserving the Qi Lin lantern dance, a traditional art form. Special art courses and activity classes are organized to train students in dance techniques. Despite not being professional performers since childhood, these students demonstrate dedication and enthusiasm for mastering the dance. The dance requires physical stamina and the ability to convey graceful movements, with each prop weighing nearly 20 kilograms. Boys engage in daily strength training exercises, while flag handlers focus on stability training for over 20 minutes per session. The commitment of Luocheng's young generation to preserve and showcase the dance is evident in their dedication. Mr. Hu, a key figure in this preservation effort, emphasizes the importance of contributing to Luocheng's cultural heritage through the Qi Lin lantern dance. This holistic approach to literacy development integrates cultural heritage and artistic expression, enriching students' understanding of their cultural identity and history, as shown in Figure 4.

Qi Lin lantern dance preservation in luocheng central kindergarten

Luocheng Central Kindergarten is incorporating Qi Lin lantern dance into its early childhood education program,



Figure 3. Luocheng Central Primary School integrates the elements

Source: Kun He, from fieldwork in June 2023



Figure 4. Qi Lin lantern dance for the students of Luocheng Middle School

Source: Kun He, from fieldwork in June 2023

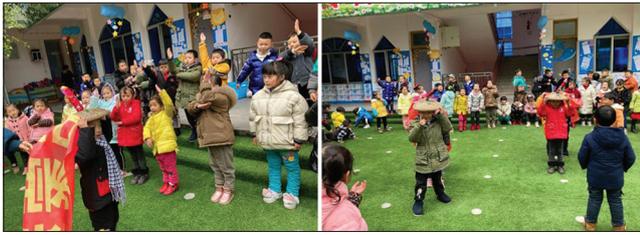


Figure 5. Rehearses a Qi Lin lantern dance for the children in Luocheng Central Kindergarten

Source: Kun He, from fieldwork in June 2023

blending folk art with various teaching activities. The kindergarten has strategically integrated the dance into activities to connect with local children in the Luocheng area, familiarizing them with the art form and its cultural significance. This approach enhances children's understanding of their cultural heritage and fosters a sense of national pride and confidence. Teachers engage children by sharing stories related to the dance, such as "The Story of the Qi Lin Rain," which not only educates them about the cultural background but also ignites their enthusiasm for the art form, laying a strong foundation for holistic literacy development rooted in cultural awareness, as shown in Figure 5.

Luocheng's educational approach focuses on preserving and integrating Qi Lin lantern dance to promote holistic literacy development and cultural appreciation among students. The curriculum teaches children about the dance's origins and significance through classroom discussions and storytelling sessions. Students are encouraged to observe and analyze the dance's composition through interactive games and role-playing activities. They are also immersed in the production process, enhancing their understanding of the dance's intricacies, and improving their manual dexterity and creative skills. Finally, organized viewings of Qi Lin lantern dance performances allow students to experience the unique characteristics of this folk art firsthand, fostering their connection to the dance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study embarked on investigating the impact of Qi Lin Lantern Dance preservation on holistic literacy development among students in Chinese schools, as outlined in the research question. The discussion delves into the alignment of research findings with theoretical principles, the effectiveness of research methods in capturing relevant data, and the overall implications for educational practice and cultural sustainability.

The research findings align closely with the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review. Cultural-historical activity theory and Socio-cultural theory highlight the role of cultural artifacts and social interactions in cognitive development. The preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance, deeply rooted in Chinese culture, provides students with meaningful cultural experiences, enhancing their literacy skills and cognitive abilities (Sannino & Engeström, 2018; Panhwar et al., 2016). Additionally, the emphasis on Cultural Sustainability resonates with efforts to transmit

cultural heritage across generations, ensuring cultural continuity and fostering a sense of identity among students (Barthel-Bouchier, 2016).

The research methods employed, including formal and informal interviews, observations, and focus group discussions, proved effective in gathering comprehensive data. Key informants with expertise in Qi Lin Lantern Dance preservation provided nuanced insights, enriching the understanding of cultural practices and educational initiatives (Chen & Sensai, 2024). The inclusion of visual aids and personal experiences enhanced the depth of the research results, offering a holistic view of the impact of cultural preservation on literacy development in Chinese schools.

The study's findings hold significant implications for educational practice and cultural sustainability. Integrating Qi Lin Lantern Dance preservation into school curricula promotes cultural awareness, enhances students' literacy skills, and fosters a deeper appreciation for cultural heritage (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2023; Warwick, 2016). The involvement of schools in preserving traditional art forms like the Qi Lin Lantern Dance contributes to cultural sustainability by ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge and values to future generations (Zhu & Maags, 2020).

In conclusion, the research underscores the vital role of cultural heritage preservation in holistic literacy development within Chinese schools. The preservation of the Qi Lin Lantern Dance not only aligns with theoretical principles emphasizing cultural engagement and cognitive development but also reflects effective research methodologies in capturing diverse perspectives. The study's outcomes advocate for the integration of cultural practices into educational settings to promote cultural sustainability, enrich students' educational experiences, and foster a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. By bridging theory and practice, this research contributes valuable insights to evidence-based educational practices and advocates for the continued preservation of intangible cultural heritage in educational contexts.

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