

A Comparative Analysis of Thai and Chinese Dragon Dance: Pak Nam Pho and Chaozhou

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Abstract

This article aimed to study 1) the historical and cultural evolution of the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance and the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance, 2) the impact of these changes on cultural identity and community dynamics within the Thai-Chinese population of Pak Nam Pho, and 3) the mechanisms of cultural transmission and adaptation in both dragon dances. The sample was composed of dragon dance experts from Pak Nam Pho and Chaozhou. They were selected by purposive sampling. The instrument for collecting data was through interviews, field observations, and literature analysis. Data were analyzed using Descriptive statistics and Content Analysis. The research results were found as follows: 1) the Chaozhou Dance has undergone significant changes due to globalization, transforming into a more modernized form, 2) the Pak Nam Pho Dance has retained more traditional elements, reflecting a strong resistance to cultural assimilation, and 3) these differences have affected the cultural identity and community dynamics within Pak Nam Pho's Thai-Chinese population, with adaptations in the Chaozhou Dance leading to a sense of cultural loss, whereas preservation efforts in the Pak Nam Pho Dance have contributed to a stronger sense of cultural pride and community cohesion. This underscores the importance of balancing cultural adaptation and preservation to ensure the vitality of traditional practices in modern society. By comparing these two dragon dances, this study provides valuable insights into how traditional practices can evolve while maintaining their core cultural significance, offering lessons for cultural preservation efforts worldwide. The research contributes to the broader understanding of cultural heritage, identity formation, and community cohesion in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Dragon Dance; Cultural Memory; Comparative Analysis; Cultural Heritage; Cultural Identity

Introduction

During the feudal period in China, when people encountered unexplainable phenomena, they often turned to superstitious beliefs, such as praying to the dragon for rain and performing rituals (Tho, 2015). The dragon dance, a vibrant and symbolic performing art, emerged as a cornerstone of cultural expression and community cohesion (Tsouvala & Magos, 2016). The Pak Nam Pho dragon dance in Thailand is a highly valued activity in the local community. The long-term preservation of the Pak Nam Pho dragon dance helps to enhance cultural pride and community cohesion (Goodridge, 1999). Tingfei Chen, the captain of the Pak Nam Pho dragon dance, said that the origin of the dragon dance in Thailand is the Chaozhou dragon dance in Guangdong Province, China. With the historical changes, the rapid development of globalization and modernization has led to significant changes in dragon dance customs, which have yet to be fully explored and understood. Global influences have mainly influenced the Chaozhou dragon dance in China, and it has undergone more significant changes than the Pak Nam Pho dragon dance in Thailand (Nor & Stepputat, 2016). Previous research has documented the importance of dragon dance in China and Thailand, emphasizing the role of dragon dance in traditional festivals and its significance in expressing cultural heritage and promoting community cohesion (Goodridge, 1999). The Pak Nam Pho dragon dance in Thailand, founded in 1963, and the Teochew dragon dance, which originated in the mid-17th century, provide compelling case studies for studying the adaptability of cultural practices. Related research reveals that dragon dance activities enhance community connections and cross-cultural dialogue (Mulryne, Testaverde, & Aliverti, 2015). These dances provide a unique perspective on how communities negotiate their cultural heritage in a changing environment. While maintaining its Chinese roots, Thai dance has successfully incorporated local Thai aesthetics to form a unique identity that strengthens the connection between the Thai-Chinese community in Pak Nam Pho. A comprehensive overview of the Pak Nam Pho dragon dance and its origins helps to understand the evolving nature of dragon dance in globalization and modernization (Sparacino et al., 2000).

This study focuses on the intersection of cultural preservation and adaptation in performing arts. This study explores how traditional practices such as dragon dance can be maintained while adapting to the transformation of contemporary society, highlighting the importance of cultural

preservation and adaptation in the transmission of traditional practices. Due to the positive role of arts in community identity and cohesion, the target audience of this study includes cultural scholars, anthropologists, and policymakers interested in the sustainability of cultural traditions in the context of globalization. In addition, this study also meets the needs of local communities, such as the Thai–Chinese expatriates in Pak Nam Pho, who are grappling with the challenges of preserving their cultural heritage while accepting new influences. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge on cultural adaptation and provide implications for future conservation efforts and community development initiatives (Wong, 2013).

This study delves into the rich tradition of dragon dance, focusing on the transformation of dragon dance in Pak Nam Pho, Thailand and Teochew, China, to understand its evolution and contemporary relevance. Through comparative research, valuable insights are provided into the balance between tradition and modernity, cultural identity, and the impact of globalization (Chao, 2000). The paper is structured to analyze the differences and adaptations of these dances in different cultural landscapes and their impact on the Thai–Chinese community's cultural identity and community dynamics in Pak Nam Pho, Thailand. The paper includes field observations, interviews with dragon dance captains and members, and an extensive literature review. The core of the study is to focus on how dragon dance, as an essential aspect of traditional Chinese culture, is localized and integrated into modern society, especially in Pak Nam Pho. This paper aims to explore in depth the dynamics of cultural preservation, adaptation and inheritance of traditional customs such as dragon dance in modern society. It makes an essential contribution to the understanding of cultural evolution and its impact on community dynamics. It provides a valuable reference for future research on cultural preservation and adaptation in the context of globalization.

Research Objectives

1. To study the historical and cultural aspects of the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance in Nakhon Sawan district, Thailand, in comparison with the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance from Guangdong Province, China.
2. To examine the variances and adaptations these dances have undergone in different cultural landscapes.
3. To analyze the impact of these changes on the cultural identity and community dynamics within the Thai–Chinese community in Pak Nam Pho, Thailand.

Literature Review

This study compares the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance and the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance to fill knowledge gaps in existing literature. It explores historical, cultural, and modern practices to understand the evolution and significance of these dances and their impact on cultural identity and community cohesion. Historical research highlights the origins and traditional functions of the dragon dance, while modern studies discuss its commercialization and adaptation. Preservation efforts in diaspora communities and integrating local beliefs in Thai-Chinese communities illustrate cultural transmission and adaptation. By synthesizing these findings, the study provides a comprehensive view of the dragon dance's role in cultural preservation and identity.

Previous studies provide valuable insights into the evolution and significance of the dragon dance within Chinese culture and its diaspora. Historical analysis highlights the importance of the dragon dance in invoking rain and deities, underlining its deep cultural roots in ancient China (Sim, 2015; Tho, 2015). These studies establish a foundational understanding of the dragon dance's origins and traditional functions, emphasizing its role in agricultural societies and superstitious beliefs associated with unexplainable phenomena.

Further research discusses the modernization and commercialization of dragon dance, noting a shift towards entertainment-oriented performances that reflect contemporary societal changes (Hempel & Sue-Chan, 2010). This shift highlights the adaptation of traditional cultural practices to modern contexts. However, these studies do not extensively explore the implications of these changes on cultural identity and traditional values within local and diaspora communities.

Preserving traditional elements in the dragon dance among overseas Chinese communities is another critical aspect covered in the literature. Efforts by these communities to retain cultural authenticity and resist commercialization are emphasized, highlighting the dragon dance's role in reinforcing cultural identity and fostering community cohesion, particularly during celebrations like the Chinese New Year (McPhee, 1970; Xu et al., 2017). However, these studies need more recent data and a deeper analysis of how these practices are balanced with the influences of host countries' cultures.

The literature explored the Integration and Adaptation of the Dragon Dance Within Thai-Chinese Communities and discussed incorporating local religious beliefs, such as the association with the sea goddess Guanyin, into the dragon dance practices in Thailand (Tobias, 1977). Additionally, the cultural significance of the Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance is emphasized,

particularly its role in community cohesion and cultural identity (Lertsawaengkit & Rattananungsikul, 2023). Despite these insights, there needs to be more comparative analysis of dragon dance practices between different regions, particularly Thailand and China.

The relationship among these literatures can be systematized to highlight a comprehensive view of the dragon dance's cultural transmission, adaptation, and significance:

Historical Significance and Traditional Functions: Studies (Sim, 2015; Tho, 2015) provide a foundational understanding of the dragon dance's origins, emphasizing its historical and religious significance.

Modern Adaptations and Commercialization: Research (Hempel & Sue-Chan, 2010) discusses the evolution of the dragon dance into a more entertainment-oriented activity, reflecting modern societal changes and the need for cultural adaptation.

Preservation in Diaspora Communities: Efforts to maintain traditional elements in diaspora communities (McPhee, 1970; Xu et al., 2017) underscore the importance of cultural authenticity and the role of dragon dance in reinforcing community identity.

Cultural Integration and Local Adaptation: The integration of local religious beliefs and the adaptation of the dragon dance in Thai-Chinese communities (Tobias, 1977; Lertsawaengkit & Rattananungsikul, 2023) illustrate how traditional practices are maintained and modified in different cultural contexts.

Given these gaps, this research comprehensively analyzed the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance and the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance. By examining the modern adaptations, cultural identity, community dynamics, and integration of local cultural elements, this study seeks to understand how these traditional practices are preserved, adapted, and transformed in different cultural settings. The research draws on recent data from government agencies, research articles, and insights from critical theorists to offer a nuanced understanding of the dragon dance phenomenon. This analysis will contribute to the knowledge of cultural preservation, identity, and adaptation in a globalized world, providing valuable insights for policymakers, community leaders, and cultural practitioners.

Conceptual Framework

This research is a research study. It delves into the historical and cultural aspects of The Chaozhou Dragon Dance in China and The Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance in Thailand, their evolution in different cultural contexts, and their impact on cultural identity and community dynamics,

particularly within the Thai-Chinese community in Pak Nam Pho, Thailand. Based on the conceptualization of culture in the traditional practice of dragon dance, the researcher has explored in depth the challenges and opportunities posed by cultural diversity in conjunction with cross-cultural theories and identified a conceptual framework for the study. The details are as follows.

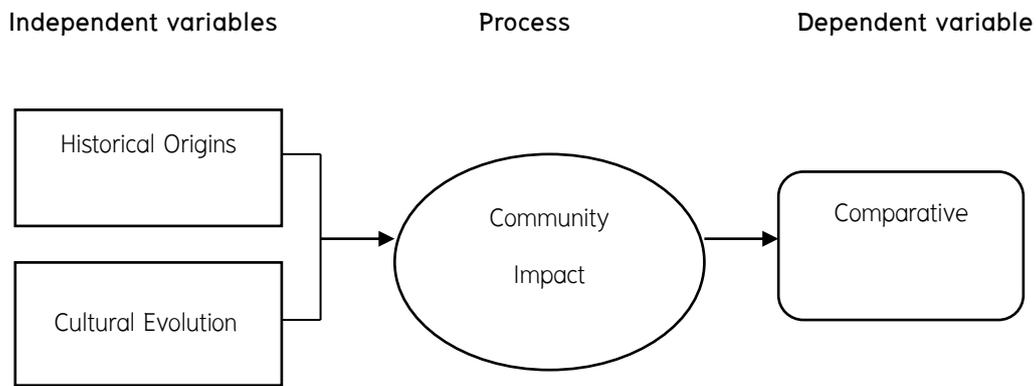


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

The research methodology utilized in the study is a combination of qualitative data collection techniques, including fieldwork observations, interviews with dragon dance team captains and members, and extensive literature reviews. Semi-structured interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of the subject, while field observations offered in-depth insights into the actual practices and performances. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were applied to analyze the collected data, aiming to investigate the historical and cultural aspects of the dragon dances, their variances and adaptations in different cultural landscapes, and their impact on the cultural identity and community dynamics within the Thai-Chinese community in Pak Nam Pho, Thailand.

Research Results

Table 1 describes and compares the characteristics and differences between the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance and Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance, with data up to 2024.

Name	Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance, Guangdong Province, China	Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance, Nakhon Sawan district, Thailand
Origin Time	1640	1963
Molding style	Chinese Chaozhou Style	Chinese Chaozhou Style
Size	26meters and 80 kilograms	52 meters and 180 kilograms
Dragon Material	Chinese dragon uses bamboo, cloth, red cotton thread, acrylic, wire, and wool balls.	Thai dragon uses styrofoam, satin cloth, colored cotton thread, acrylic paint, and bells.
Dragon Modeling Features	<p>Chinese dragon is characterized by its painted bamboo frame, acrylic colors, and glossy finish.</p> <p>Dragon Body:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Chinese dragon has 7 segments of painted silk fabric. <p>Dragon Tail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Chinese tail features 5 hair-like structures with cotton and cloth. 	<p>Thai dragon is foam plastic with acrylic paint, adorned with bells and charms.</p> <p>Dragon Body:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Thai dragon consists of 21 segments of golden satin fabric. <p>Dragon Tail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Thai tail has 6 hair-like structures, cotton, and laser fabric.
Dragon Dance	Chinese New Year	Chinese New Year
Performances	Traditional Festivals	Processions of Deities
Occasions	Processions of Deities Important Events	Important Events
Duration	End of day, typically 1 to 2 hours.	<p>Spans over 2 days:</p> <p>Day 1: 7:00 PM to 10:00 PM.</p> <p>Day 2: 9:00 AM to 10:00 PM.</p>
Purpose of the Ceremony	Pray for favorable weather along the Han River in China.	Pray for favorable weather along the Mekong River in Thailand.
Nature of the Ceremony	Dragon dance performances are intertwined with the urban development of Chaozhou, China, representing a form of celebratory activity.	The dragon, symbolizing the sea goddess Guanyin's mount in Pak Nam Pho, Thailand, is believed to bring good luck when it appears

Process	Amidst the drumbeats of the dragon dance troupe, members holding the dragon pearl guide the dragon's appearance, performing dragon dance moves combined with Chinese martial arts. During nighttime performances, fireworks continue to erupt from the dragon's nostrils as it dances.	At 4:00 PM on the day of the event, a consecration ceremony for the dragon is held at Pak Nam Pho Chinese Temples. At 7:00 PM, it parades alongside the procession of deities, culminating in a performance where the dragon climbs up iron poles to spray fireworks at the event's finale. The next day at 9:00 AM, it joins the deity procession, The dragon will enter the homes of those who have placed tributes on their doorsteps, or in their stores, to deliver blessings. Then, at designated locations, the dragon climbs iron poles to spray water, Next, the dragon continued to walk until he had gone through all the streets. Finally, at 10:00 PM, the dragon performs a "bathing" ritual at the Chao Phraya River: The dragon dancers walk into the river with their dragons held up, and once the water is partially submerged up to the calves of the dancers, the team begins to perform a dance in which the dragons keep spinning around on the river, spraying water in the process, and finally leave the river and return to the base of the team
Props	Dragon pearl Pyrotechnics for dragon nostrils Dragon dance music ensemble's gongs, drums, cymbals Drums, gongs and cymbals for the dragon dance music ensemble	Dragon pearl Two 20-meter iron poles for dragon dancers to climb Scrolls with auspicious phrases written on them Pyrotechnics for dragon mouth Water soaked with pomelo leaves for dragon mouth Drums and cymbals for the dragon dance music ensemble

Music	Customized music with Chinese Chaozhou style	Improvisational Performance
Disposal of props after the event	Repeated use, timely inspection and organization of elements and props on the dragon after each event, and repair and refurbishment for the next event	The dragon body used in the event will be used as a training prop before the next event until a new one is made, and the old one will be put into the Chao Phraya River by the dragon dancers until it sinks to the bottom of the river, completing the final part of the dragon's blessing on the Mekong River The dragon's head and tail will be repainted and refurbished
Dragon Dance Team Size	80 people, of which 8 are music players, the number of people on the field for each dragon dance activity is 8 people, 1 person holding a dragon ball, 7 people are responsible for the dragon dance	180 people, of which 40 are music players, the number of people on the field for each dragon dance activity is 22 people, 1 person holding a dragon ball, 21 people are responsible for the dragon dance
Nature of personnel of the Dragon Dance Team	All regular members are part-time, have their own jobs, and will gather on their own during the Dragon Dance training There is a training team for young people aged 9–17, training every week, parents send their children to train in order to enhance the physical fitness and athletic ability of young people, but also as a reserve for the regular members of the army preparation	All regular members are part-time, have their own jobs, and will gather on their own during the Dragon Dance training
Team Base	Rent a warehouse in the city to store dragons and props, and train on a fixed basketball court	There is an auditorium in the local Chinese temple for team members to train, make dragons, worship, etc.

Through the above comparative analyses of the characteristics and differences between the Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance in Thailand and the Chaozhou Dragon Dance in China, this study finds that despite the different degrees of change in both under the influence of modern social values and local customs, these dragon dances still retain deep cultural significance and remain

connected to their ancestral traditions. These adaptive changes, combined with the continued popularity of the dragon dances, highlight the dynamic nature of cultural preservation and adaptation. The study underscores the importance of cultural continuity and evolution, demonstrating how traditional practices maintain their relevance and vitality in modern society.

Discussions

The research findings reveal the successful integration of local Thai characteristics while preserving traditional in the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance. This has led to its evolution into a popular modern performance that holds significant cultural meaning for the Thai-Chinese community. The adaptation reflects variations in size, materials, and modeling styles, which encompass local cultural influences. Despite these adaptations, the research underscores the continued reverence for the ancestral heritage of the Chaozhou Dragon Dance within the Thai adaptation. While some within the Thai-Chinese community in Pak Nam Pho feel a sense of cultural loss due to the adaptations in the Chaozhou Dance, the preservation of traditional elements in the Pak Nam Pho Dance contributes to a stronger sense of cultural pride and community cohesion (Ward, 1979).

The study further highlights the distinct functions served by dragon dances in their respective societies. The Chaozhou Dragon Dance remains a traditional, ritual-centric performance deeply rooted in cultural and historical significance. In contrast, the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance has adapted to local Thai festivities, symbolizing cultural identity and fostering community cohesion within the Thai-Chinese community. This highlights how the dragon dance traditions have adapted to suit specific cultural landscapes while retaining their underlying spiritual and communal importance.

These findings emphasize the dynamic nature of cultural preservation and adaptation (Glenn, 2004). They illustrate how traditional practices can evolve to retain their relevance and vibrancy within modern societies. These transformations reflect the community's deep reverence for their ancestral culture while embracing the necessary changes for cultural continuity and integration.

Overall, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the cultural continuity and change in dragon dance traditions. It highlights the successful integration of traditional elements with contemporary influences, showcasing the adaptive nature of cultural practices. These findings have implications for the broader field of cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of

preserving and evolving traditional practices in a globalized world, where the dynamics of cultural memory, heritage, and adaptability are essential for maintaining cultural identity and community cohesion.

Knowledge from Research

Tradition with Adaptation: The Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance merges traditional Chaozhou elements with Thai influences, renewing its cultural relevance for the Thai–Chinese community.

Material Innovation: Modifications in dragon dance materials reflect local cultural adaptation while improving performance durability.

Design Evolution: Adjustments in the dragon dance's aesthetic features appeal to contemporary sensibilities, maintaining its significance across generations.

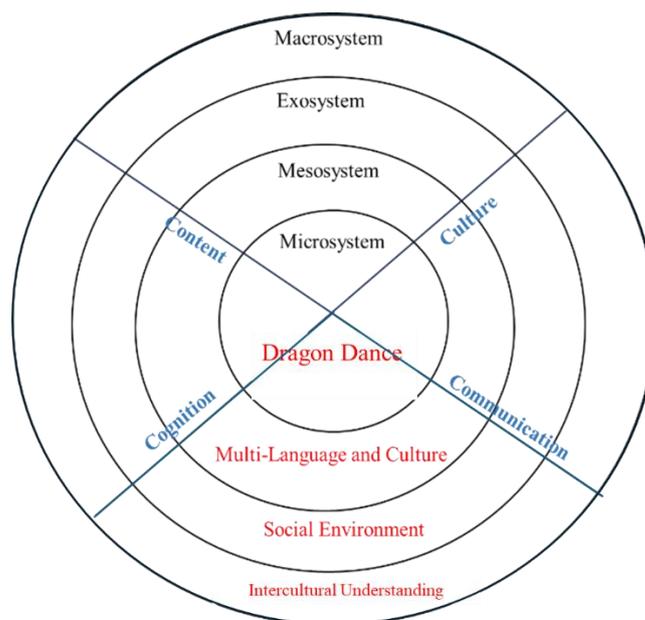


Fig.2 Knowledge Framework

Conclusion

The comparisons made in this study show profound changes in the process of cultural diffusion and localization. The development and change of the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance, is a typical example of cultural integration and adaptation, which not only retained the core features of the original culture, but also absorbed new cultural elements and social demands to form a unique regional cultural phenomenon. It has become a modern entertainment activity that

emphasizes performance and spectacle. In contrast, the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance focuses more on tradition and ritual significance, its movements and performance forms, and more on heritage and expression of cultural connotations.

Through the analysis of this study, we can better understand the process of how culture spreads, adapts and evolves in different societies and environments, and provide useful reference for the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture, and this cultural comparison is an important revelation for the study of the future innovative design of Chinese dragon dance. First, it provides a case study that dragon dance culture not only serves as an important link for Chinese community building and social cohesion, but is also an important part of the modern identities and lifestyles of Chinese and overseas Chinese; second, the example of the Thai Pak Nam Pho Dragon Dance, suggests that measures to increase the spectacle and entertainment of the performing arts can be effective in attracting a wider audience, thereby facilitating the dissemination of the culture, and can also inspire researchers to explore how to maintain the essence of traditional culture while making the necessary innovations and adjustments so that more traditional culture can be revitalized in the context of globalization.

Cultural diffusion and localization are central themes in the study, which examines the Thai Pak Nam Pho and Chaozhou Dragon Dances as exemplars of cultural integration and adaptation. The Thai adaptation, while retaining the core features of the original culture, has absorbed new elements and social demands, creating a unique regional cultural phenomenon that emphasizes performance and spectacle. This evolution into a modern entertainment activity is juxtaposed with the Chinese Chaozhou Dragon Dance, which remains deeply rooted in tradition and ritual significance, emphasizing heritage and cultural expression.

The study offers a nuanced understanding of how culture spreads, adapts, and evolves in different societies and environments. It provides valuable insights for the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture and offers important revelations for the future design of Chinese dragon dance. First, it highlights the role of dragon dance culture in community building and social cohesion, both within the Chinese community and among Chinese diaspora. Second, it suggests that enhancing the spectacle and entertainment value of performing arts can attract a wider audience, aiding in the dissemination of culture. This insight also spurs researchers to explore how to maintain the essence of traditional culture while innovating and adjusting to make necessary changes, thereby revitalizing traditional practices in a globalized context.

In summary, the study synthesizes its findings into a mind map centered on cultural diffusion and localization, with two main branches representing the Thai Pak Nam Pho and Chaozhou Dragon Dances. Each branch further divides into key themes such as cultural integration, adaptation, retention of core features, and absorption of new elements. From these themes branch out insights for cultural innovation, community cohesion, and the preservation of traditional practices in a modern, globalized world. The mind map serves as a visual representation of the intricate web of cultural change and continuity, illustrating how traditional forms can evolve while still honoring their historical and cultural roots.

Suggestions

For future research, the study suggests a broadened investigation into the cultural functions and ceremonial uses of the Thai Pak Nam Pho and Chaozhou Dragon Dances. A deeper exploration could offer a fuller picture of their evolution and the roles they play in cultural preservation and identity formation. Additionally, fostering ongoing partnerships among community leaders, cultural practitioners, and academic researchers may create a robust framework for sustaining and revitalizing the heritage and vibrancy of these dragon dance traditions.

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