

Value Transmission in Flux: Evolving Civic Education in Incense Fire Dragon Dance Rituals of Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi

Taiwen Tang

Hunan University of Humanities, Science and Technology, Loudi, Hunan, China

Abstract: Against the backdrop of accelerating modernization and urbanization, the adaptive transformation of traditional culture and the regeneration of its educational functions have become critical issues. This study focuses on the culturally diverse region at the junction of Hunan, Guangdong, and Jiangxi provinces, taking the nationally listed intangible cultural heritage, the Incense Fire Dragon Dance (Xianghuo Long), as its subject. It investigates how this tradition achieves creative transformation amid rapid social change—shifting from its traditional functions of blessing, disaster prevention, clan cohesion, and ethical education to modern civic educational functions such as public participation, cultural identity, and social responsibility. Through field research in the border region and an integrated literature review, this study reveals the systematic mechanisms behind the functional evolution of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual. Findings indicate that by leveraging its deep community roots and dynamic adaptability, the Incense Fire Dragon Dance has progressively evolved into a vital cultural practice for cultivating civic literacy. Its evolutionary logic embodies the creative reconciliation of the relationships between tradition and modernity, state and locality, and individual and community. From the moral theory education perspective, this study offers a mechanistic explanation for the modern educational value transformation of intangible cultural heritage. It also provides theoretical and practical pathways for leveraging local cultural resources to innovate civic education, strengthen the sense of community for the Chinese nation, and deepen grassroots social governance.

Keywords: Incense Fire Dragon Dance; Civic Education; Hunan – Guangdong - Jiangxi Border Region; Moral Theory Education

1. Introduction

Amid the impacts of globalization and modernization, the preservation and functional transformation of traditional Chinese culture have become central issues concerning cultural security and national identity. The Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi (Xiang-Gan-Yue) border region (encompassing Rucheng County in Hunan, Renhua County in Guangdong, and Chongyi County in Jiangxi), serving as a marginal hub of multicultural convergence, has witnessed its representative intangible cultural heritage—the Incense Fire Dragon Dance—evolve from traditional functions such as clan worship and community blessing to embody new civic education connotations in the modern era. This phenomenon reflects three underlying drivers: First, the identity crisis of traditional rural cultural values during urbanization [1] urgently demands that traditional cultural vehicles restore the spiritual bonds between the individual and the community. Second, the existing civic education system's reliance on explicit curricular instruction has long overlooked the latent educational potential of local cultural resources, calling for innovative, culture-based educational paradigms. Third, field studies in areas such as Rucheng in southern Hunan, Renhua in northern Guangdong, and Chongyi in southern Jiangxi demonstrate that the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual has been organically integrated into the cultivation of civic literacy—including rule internalization, ecological ethics, and public participation—transforming it into a key educational public space within grassroots society. This leads to the core research questions: Amid the profound transformations in contemporary Chinese social structures, how has the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual achieved a creative leap from a traditional symbolic system of values to modern civic educational functions? What are the internal dynamics and interactive mechanisms driving this functional evolution?

2. The Historical Context and Cultural Ecology of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance in the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi Border Region

2.1 Geographical, Historical, and Socio-Cultural Characteristics of the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi Border Region

2.1.1 The distinctive geographical location and historical evolution of the Hunan – Guangdong -Jiangxi border region

The Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border area is situated in the heart of the Nanling Mountains. Historically, due to its mountainous terrain, it formed an unadministered zone. Centered around Rucheng County in Hunan Province, Renhua County in Guangdong Province, and Chongyi County in Jiangxi Province, this region serves as the watershed between the Yangtze River and Pearl River systems, as well as a transitional zone between Central Plains culture and Lingnan culture. Rucheng County is located in the southeast of Chenzhou City, Hunan Province, bordering Chongyi County of Jiangxi Province to the east and Renhua County of Guangdong Province to the south. An ancient prefecture of Southern Hunan, Rucheng has a history of over 1,650 years since its establishment. Historical records indicate it was a border area of Chu State during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. (Source: Official website of the People's Government of Rucheng County). Renhua County, known as the North Gate of Guangdong, adjoins Chongyi County of Jiangxi Province to the east and borders Rucheng County of Hunan Province to the north. Renhua County was first established during the Qi Dynasty (479-502 AD) in the Southern Dynasties period. (Source: Official website of the People's Government of Renhua County). Chongyi County was established in the winter of the 12th year of the Zhengde era of the Ming Dynasty (1517 AD). Its name, meaning "advocating righteousness," was given by Wang Yangming. Located on the southwestern frontier of Jiangxi Province, it borders Renhua County of Guangdong Province to the south and Rucheng County of Hunan Province to the west. (Source: Official website of the People's Government of Chongyi County).

2.1.2 Blending and layering of diverse cultures

The unique geographical location of the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border area has

fostered the exchange and integration of Central Plains culture, Baiyue culture, maritime culture, and Hakka culture. Zhou Dunyi, the founding scholar of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, profoundly influenced local society during his tenure in Rucheng by establishing county schools, promoting education, and spreading Neo-Confucian principles. To this day, six major Neo-Confucian academies remain in Rucheng County. Furthermore, the ancestral hall culture within Hakka culture is particularly flourishing; according to incomplete statistics, there are over 900 ancestral halls in Rucheng County alone. Zhu Xi incorporated the Zhu Family Instructions into clan rituals in his *Family Rites*, strengthening clan cohesion [2]. During ethnic migrations, the Yao people's "Pan Wang Great Song" and the She people's "Phoenix Totem" were continuously disseminated and interacted within this region. Notably, the survival strategy of some She people changing their surname from "Lan" to "Lan" during ethnic integration reflects ethnic identity fluidity. However, closer analysis reveals that the multiculturalism in the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border area is not merely a simple coexistence; these ethnic groups have coexisted and found common ground through long-term inter-ethnic interaction, embodying the diversity and unity of Chinese culture. The Incense Fire Dragon Dance, nurtured in this border region, serves as a carrier for multicultural genes and exchange, achieving the integration of cultural symbols.

2.1.3 Clan-dominated local social order

The geographical position at the junction of three provinces facilitated cultural blending and, due to its distance from various administrative centers, reinforced the need for local autonomy, presenting a trinity model of "clan-village-faith." Clans, with their tight organizational structures (example: lineage branches, sub-branches, ancestral halls) and clear genealogies, became the de facto authority filling administrative gaps and enabling effective local governance. According to incomplete statistics, Rucheng boasts over 900 existing ancestral halls, which serve as power centers governing resource allocation and ritual organization. The complex and varied terrain of the tri-province border area posed significant challenges for individual family production and life in the agrarian era. Village communities, based on shared territory, became essential

collaborative units superseding individual households to cope with geographical challenges. Simultaneously, the Han, She, Yao, and other historically immigrant groups blended and coexisted here, resulting in a distinctly hybrid belief system. Large-scale public ritual activities, such as the making and dancing of the Incense Fire Dragon, were key mechanisms for strengthening the identity of this geographical community. Through shared labor, ritual performance, and collective effervescence, it tightly bound together people living in the same geographical space, sharing a set of belief symbols, and facing common survival challenges. It constructed and continuously reinforced a sense of place and belonging based on shared territory and common cultural practices, strengthening citizens' collectivism and geographical identity.

2.2 Origin, Distribution, and Core Functions of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual

2.2.1 Origin legends and historical genealogy

The origin of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance requires further research, but according to historical records and oral traditions, it existed during the Tang Dynasty. It developed through the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, reaching its peak in the Qing Dynasty. According to exhibits at the Rucheng Long March Culture Exhibition and Heritage Hall: "The origin of Rucheng's Incense Fire Dragon Dance lies in worshipping dragons to stop floods, a folk activity praying for favorable weather. Its image primarily derives from dragon murals and sculptures in local temples." (Field investigation, February 10, 2025). Zhang Jiuling's depiction of the "resplendent candle dragon" in *Fenghe Shengzhi Zhulong Zhaiji* during the Tang Dynasty [3], reflect the widespread dissemination of Incense Fire Dragon Dance activities in urban society. The sacrificial scene described in the Qing Dynasty *Tongzhi-Guiyang Zhili Zhouzhi* [4] involving "gathering hundreds of people to carry the deity" corroborates the inheritance and evolution of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance in Southern Hunan. Notably, folk practices like the Yao people's "Dragon Worship Ceremony" [5] and the She people's Lantern Festival "Incense Fire Dragon Dance" further attest to it becoming a shared cultural belief among various ethnic groups in the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border area.

2.2.2 Regional distribution and local variations

The distribution and variation of the "Incense Fire Dragon Dance" within the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border region are vivid manifestations shaped by the area's complex geography and multicultural environment. Rucheng County, Hunan Province, located at the convergence of the Luoxiao Mountains and Nanling Range in Southern Hunan, features relatively open river valleys and basins with gentler terrain conducive to large village clusters. Historically established clan societies, such as the Zhu and Fan lineages, have deep roots here, with large, populous clan settlements. Their Incense Fire Dragon primarily takes the form of large flat or round dragons, typically consisting of 21 sections or more, requiring nearly a hundred people to carry it. This is not merely a technical or aesthetic choice but a core display of clan strength and social mobilization capacity. The massive dragon body symbolizes the clan's prosperity and unity; the participation of a hundred people in carrying and dancing the dragon is itself a grand performance of clan power, serving to strengthen internal cohesion and demonstrate external prestige. Chongyi County, Jiangxi Province, is predominantly mountainous and hilly, with villages often located in valleys or on gentle slopes, featuring limited, rugged flat land and inconvenient transportation. Historically an important settlement area for the She people, it formed a pattern of She-Han cohabitation and cultural mutual influence. Strictly constrained by steep terrain and narrow village lanes, large long dragons are impractical. Instead, a compact and efficient "short dragon" (segment dragon) evolved, typically around 5 sections. This dragon form is lightweight and highly maneuverable, specially adapted for dancing on rugged mountain paths, terraced fields, and compact village spaces. Its flexibility also aligns with the relatively adaptable and pragmatic lifestyle of mountain residents. Renhua County, Guangdong Province, is situated at a strategic crossroads of Guangdong, Hunan, and Jiangxi, on the southern foothills of the Nanling Mountains within the Danxia landform area. Historically an important trade route and pass, and a Hakka settlement area, it retains Central Plains cultural foundations while also being more open and possessing a commercial cultural tradition due to its location. Its Incense Fire Dragon mainly features the "single whip dragon" danced by 7 or 9 people, balancing flexibility

with the dragon's majestic form. Its functions have gradually shifted from traditional community worship and warding off evil/inviting good fortune towards cultural-tourism performances, folk custom displays, and commercial revenue generation.

2.2.3 A three-dimensional perspective on traditional functions

The historical context of complex geography and diverse ethnic interaction shaped a cultural psychology highly dependent on local knowledge, emphasizing group collaboration and reverence for nature. As an iconic folk activity in this region, the traditional functions of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance were not solely about ritual entertainment. Instead, they were deeply embedded within the structural network of local relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and among humans themselves, forming a distinctive "three-dimensional" functional system with distinct regional characteristics.

First, the Human-Nature Dimension. Challenged by their geographical habitat and its uncertainties, the primary function of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual was to communicate with deities, pray for blessings, avert disasters, and construct a spiritual barrier against natural risks. Within the local belief system, the dragon is the supreme deity controlling wind and rain, warding off evil, and bestowing blessings. Inserting countless lit incense sticks into the dragon's body symbolizes conveying the collective prayers of the entire village to the heavens through the sacred medium of the "fire dragon." Each incense stick materializes an individual wish, converging into a powerful collective plea. After the ritual, the "incense ash," believed to contain the dragon god's power and blessings, is endowed with potent efficacy for warding off evil and inviting good fortune. "Villagers reverently place the incense ash in cattle pens, pigsties, chicken coops, etc. , firmly believing it can ward off plague and evil spirits and ensure the prosperity of all domestic animals'." (Field interview, He Zijun, July 21, 2024). This is not merely superstition but reflects how villagers, within an agrarian ecology, sought psychological comfort and a sense of control through the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual, integrating belief practices closely into productive life—a form of ecological wisdom. The application of the "incense ash" is the

concrete action transforming the "Incense Fire Dragon's divine power" into protection for real productive forces.

Second, the Human-Society Dimension. The Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual is the annual, village-level collective action of the largest scale, serving as the core mechanism for producing and reinforcing village community identity. As stated by a villager from Niutoulong Village, Rucheng County: "From cutting bamboo in the mountains, splitting it into strips, and framing the dragon's skeleton, to each household contributing rice straw, organizing women and children to insert incense, to the young adults dancing the dragon, providing percussion accompaniment, and logistical support—making the dragon, dancing it, and playing the percussion are all done voluntarily" (Field interview, Xie Wenping, February 11, 2025). This obligatory all-member collaboration transcends family, lineage branches, and even clan, representing a mandatory social obligation that affirms and acknowledges village membership and responsibility. Amidst increased modern population mobility, many young adults from the border area leave for work or study. However, the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual during the Spring Festival becomes a spiritual pillar calling them back to their roots. The ritual acts as a crucial adhesive maintaining the village social structure against disintegration in an era of population movement. Third, the Interpersonal Dimension. In the agrarian era, the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual also served as a cultural classroom for transmitting local order and an important vehicle for power performance. The ritual is not just a carnival but a dynamic cultural classroom where traditional rural ethics and power structures are performed and practiced. It involves a strict hierarchical division of labor; the assignment of roles during the ritual performance is never arbitrary but mirrors local social strata and authority. "The chief officiant is usually a village elder, clan leader, or retired official esteemed for their virtue and prestige; they hold the sacred authority of the event, such as reciting prayers and lighting the dragon's eyes. Middle-aged men form the core dancers, embodying strength and responsibility, representing the clan's future hope. Adolescents often assist by guiding the way or holding lanterns, symbolizing inheritance and hope." (Field investigation, Hantian Village, February

11, 2025). This role allocation strictly follows traditional ethical norms based on age, virtue, ability, and gender. The village elders officiating publicly confirms their social status, moral prestige, and cultural capital; the youth performing tests and displays their physical prowess and sense of responsibility; children guiding the way signifies the continuation of cultural lineage. The entire activity functions as a dynamic textbook on the ideal order of rural society. Participants, especially the youth, subtly accept and internalize these ethical norms through firsthand involvement, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of local knowledge and traditional order.

3. The Emergence and Evolution of Civic Education Functions in the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual

3.1 The Impact and Reshaping of Social Change on the Ritual Field

Marx once stated: “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life.” [6].

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, land reforms stimulated people’s productive initiative and continuously improved farmers’ living standards. However, this also posed new challenges to the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual, which relied on clan assets for its performance, as its primary economic foundation underwent change. During the People’s Commune period, villagers’ identities shifted from being defined by family genealogy to being members of production cooperatives under the state’s purview, further diminishing the role of clans and ancestral halls in villagers’ minds. Yet, field investigations by the author reveal that the cultural genes did not completely break; instead, they survived underground through a dual strategy. First was the internalization of dragon god belief. The alteration of the main economic base for holding the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual deprived it of necessary material support. For a period, villagers had to temporarily suspend the ritual, turning instead to inner prayer towards the dragon god belief. Second was the productive disguise of skill transmission. Elderly artisans in the border region utilized commune bamboo weaving factories, teaching core dragon-making techniques under the guise of “producing bambooware” (Field interview, Mr. Lan,

November 11, 2025). This provided both technical support for the cultural transmission of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance and spiritual strength for its preservation.

The wave of marketization unleashed by reform and opening-up fundamentally reconfigured the survival basis of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual in the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border area. Mr. Li from En Village, Renhua County, explained: “The Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual in Encun was moved up from the original Lantern Festival to the second day of the lunar New Year. This is mainly because all the young and middle-aged adults in the village work away from home, and most leave by the sixth day of the New Year. Holding it earlier means more people can participate, making it livelier.” (Field investigation, February 10, 2025). Mr. X from Niutoulong Village, Rucheng County, said: “Our village basically holds the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual a few days before the Lantern Festival. Most young people have migrated for work, but almost everyone still in the village attends. Some people take on several roles simultaneously—setting off firecrackers, dancing the dragon, lighting candles. When the Incense Fire Dragon dances to their own home, they also have to set off firecrackers at their doorstep to receive and see off the dragon.” (Field investigation, February 11, 2025). Demographic changes directly undermined the ritual’s obligatory collaboration network, weakening the traditional model of “every household contributing labor, working together.”

The penetration of the market economy further catalyzed the functional adaptation of the ritual. First, time-space compression and symbolic transformation. The traditional Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual, from preparation and material gathering to dragon making, dancing, and farewell, spanned about a month. In Niutoulong Village, Rucheng, it is now compressed into a single day; in Wenying Village and Hantian Village, the ritual is shortened to 7 days. Second, the influence of economic rationality on community ethics. The Incense Fire Dragon Dance team from Wenying Township, Chongyi County, has performed for the New Year openings of enterprises and banks, transforming the traditional “dragon dance to reverence heaven” into corporate New Year blessings. The ritual’s adaptation from “spiritual sustenance” to “cultural commodity” signals the

transition from a rural society to a market society.

Entering the 21st century, the infiltration of information technology and value pluralism transformed the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual in the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi region from a field of closed rural consensus into a space where tradition and modernity interact. This process first manifested as the evolution of authority; the cultural adjudication power of clan elders was reconfigured by economic capital and technical knowledge. New rural elites are gradually supplementing or altering the authority of clan elders. Zhang (2024) pointed out: "Rural elites have always been regarded as key forces to communicate the urban-rural dual structure, reconcile the tension between modernity and tradition, and build socialhesion." [7]. Field research in the Hunan-Guangdong-Jiangxi border area found that villages establish "Incense Fire Dragon Dance Councils" during the activity period, where economic, political, cultural, and social capital play a leading role in the cultural transmission of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance. Simultaneously, the rise of new media technologies like short videos and live streaming breaks geographical limits, elevating the Incense Fire Dragon Dance from a village community memory to a "digital heritage." This media transformation offers new dissemination channels but also poses challenges to the "authenticity" of traditional skills and the sacredness of the traditional ritual. The shift in traditional authority marks a change in the right to interpret the ritual from monopolistic control to pluralistic sharing.

The shift in national cultural governance strategies since the 21st century has provided institutional support for the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual in this region but also accelerated its transformation from a living practice into a recognized cultural asset. National policy has reshaped the ritual field through a triple mechanism. First, hierarchical recognition bestows cultural capital. After Rucheng's Incense Fire Dragon Dance was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2008, coverage by national and provincial media, coupled with participation and promotion by key government officials, boosted its transmission and dissemination in the new era. Second, the rural revitalization strategy promotes cultural-tourism integration. This is

first seen in the evolution of performance times and spaces. Fieldwork found that Encun in Chengkou Town, Renhua County, adjusted its timing to the second day of the lunar New Year to accommodate urban-rural population mobility cycles; the Incense Fire Dragon Dance team in Wenying Village, Chongyi County, expanded the ritual's functions during Spring Festival by performing for new housewarming celebrations, farmer New Year blessings, and enterprise opening ceremonies. Third, spiritual civilization policies reshape subject relationships. Competent government departments in the border region require advance reporting for holding Incense Fire Dragon Dance Rituals. Large-scale procession routes require sufficient "Safety Plans," and village committees must sign responsibility statements, integrating organizational aspects into the administrative system. (Field investigation, February 10, 2025).

3.2 Modern Adaptation and Reconstruction of Ritual Practice

The Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual has demonstrated significant adaptive reconstruction during contemporary social transformation, specifically manifested in three dimensions: formal adjustments, participant diversification, and symbolic re-interpretation.

First, adaptive adjustments in form. Temporally, it has expanded from being limited to the traditional Spring Festival to periodic performances, such as commercial shows at Fuquan Mountain Villa on National Day (Field investigation, October 5, 2024), meeting cultural tourism consumption demands. Spatially, it has extended from ancestral halls and farmland to public domains like scenic square plazas, school campuses, and government building fronts. Additionally, elements like Western "bass drums" and fireworks have been incorporated into the activities.

Second, the diversification and expansion of participating subjects. In the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Rituals of the border area, the government acts as a resource integrator, enterprises become sponsors, schools become educational vehicles, and tourists become experiential participants.

Third, the re-interpretation of symbolic symbols. In the process of modernization, the symbolic system of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual has undergone semantic expansion and value re-embedding. The core function of "averting

disasters and praying for blessings” has not disappeared but has been endowed with new interpretations from a civic education perspective, forming a “traditional-modern” semantic composite. The collaboration among villagers in various villages of the border area during the “dragon making” (stuffing with straw) and the coordination during the “dragon dancing” precisely cultivate civic solidarity and mutual aid through ritual practice. Furthermore, after the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual at Futian Mountain Villa in Rucheng County, guiding tourists to collectively retrieve the “incense ash” transforms it into a public spirit education of “sharing community well-being.” Mr. He from the Rucheng County Cultural Relics Protection and Management Office introduced: “A 16-year-old junior high student from Langmu Village, Maqiao Town, took on the task of making the dragon for his village. He posted it on Douyin (TikTok), garnering 120, 000 views that very day.” Meanwhile, the real-time broadcasting of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual via new media technology not only achieves trans-regional sharing but also forms a cross-temporal cultural identity network. The contemporary reconstruction of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance symbolic system is essentially the creative appropriation of the traditional ritual by civic education discourse. When the “incense” burns simultaneously in ancestral halls, scenic spots, and short video platforms, its rising smoke is no longer just a medium to communicate with deities but becomes a symbolic network weaving together cultural identity, public spirit, and innovative consciousness, demonstrating the extraordinary resilience of traditional culture in responding to modern challenges.

3.3 The Emergence and Development of Civic Education Functions

3.3.1 Cultivation of public participation spirit

The Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual reconstructs community participation networks through obligatory collective action. As orally stated by Mr. Xie from Niutoulong Village, Rucheng: “The village’s Incense Fire Dragon Dance activity is entirely self-organized, and no fees are charged during the dragon dance. Participating in making the dragon, dancing the dragon, playing percussion, etc. , is all voluntary—first, to pray for the village’s blessings in the New Year; second, to enliven

the atmosphere and symbolize unity.” (Xie Wenping interview, Field investigation, February 11, 2025). Villages in the border region also raise funds through “voluntary donations publicly acknowledged” during the organization of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual (Field investigation, February 11, 2025). The participation of men, women, the young, and the old in the stages of making, parading, and transforming the dragon also reflects the democratic expansion of participating subjects. The often obligatory return of migrant workers to participate in the ritual during Spring Festival makes the ritual a practical platform for public affairs that maintains connections between urban and rural groups.

3.3.2 Training of rule awareness and collective collaboration

In terms of temporal discipline, although the phenomenon of “festival temporal expansion” has occurred regarding the timing of the Incense Fire Dragon Dance Ritual in the border area, many villages still adhere to the tradition of “choosing an auspicious day to make the dragon (zhā lóng), an auspicious hour to parade the dragon (yóu lóng), and an auspicious moment to transform the dragon (huà lóng)” for the specific stages of the activity. In terms of action discipline, the generational sequence during the dragon dance must not be transgressed. Village elders preside over sacrifices; middle-aged men are responsible for parading the dragon; adolescents are responsible for holding lanterns and guiding the way (Investigation in Hantian Village, February 11, 2025). Whether it is the high level of team coordination emphasized in the large Incense Fire Dragon Dance involving nearly a hundred people in Rucheng County, or the 5-section Incense Fire Dragon Dance made in Wenying Township, Chongyi County, constrained by mountainous terrain, which maintains dynamic balance during performance through the “figure-eight dance”—where any mistake in one section’s movement could cause teammates to be burned by incense—both constitute an embodied education in collaboration and discipline.

3.3.3 Shaping of cultural identity and local sense of belonging

Traditionally, the Incense Fire Dragon Dance strengthened clan unity through blood ties and periodic rituals like receiving the dragon, lighting incense, parading the dragon, and transforming the dragon. Durkheim noted:

“Rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups.” [8]. In the process of modernization, the government, through policy support, funding, and resource allocation, has promoted the shift of Incense Fire Dragon Dance activities from the “clan private sphere” to the “local public sphere.” Although this transformation weakens internal clan cohesion, it gradually achieves social integration from clan identity to local identity and then to national identity by constructing a shared local cultural identity. On the other hand, the identity of Incense Fire Dragon Dance participants has diversified from simply being ordinary villagers to multiple roles such as “cultural inheritors, local citizens, or national intangible cultural heritage agents.” Moreover, through performative practice, they acquire “embodied identity.” Simultaneously, being designated as “ICH inheritors” by the government incorporates them into the national cultural protection system, forming a “dual loyalty”—maintaining ethnic memory while undertaking public cultural service functions, reflecting the adaptation of individual identity amidst the tension between tradition and modernity. Tourists participating immersively transform from spectators into cultural practitioners through visual sensory stimulation and the emotional resonance of retrieving “incense ash” during the “transforming the dragon” stage. This reveals a profound essence of civic education: the embodied generation of cultural identity through practice.

3.3.4 Awakening of ecological civilization awareness

When the Incense Fire Dragon completes its tour mission on earth and reaches the “transforming the dragon” stage where the dragon’s body is incinerated, the blazing flames gradually consume the dragon’s form. This seemingly simple act of burning holds rich symbolic meaning. From an ecological perspective, the concept of “the dragon returning to heaven and earth” carries the profound implication of “nourishing all things.” In the natural world, matter follows a cyclical pattern; the passing of old things often signifies the gestation and birth of new life. After incineration, the dragon’s body turns to ashes, returning to the earth, much like the decomposition of animal and plant remains in

nature, which turn back into nutrients integrated into the soil. This process symbolizes the cyclical nature of the natural world and the perpetual renewal of life. This “transforming the dragon” ritual, embodying “the dragon returns to heaven and earth, nourishing all things,” is a vivid manifestation of the ecological view of “coexistence between heaven and humanity” in traditional Chinese culture.

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