

The Evolutionary Logic and Modern Governance Approaches of Ethnic and Folk Sports Rituals in a Rural Context

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Abstract: This study will employ a combined methodology of literature review, fieldwork and case study analysis. By systematically reviewing historical documents, local annals and relevant academic research on ethnic and folk sports rituals, it will conduct an in-depth analysis of the origins, evolutionary processes, functional transformations and social value of these rituals. The findings indicate that the process of modernisation and socio-economic transformation have posed new challenges to traditional rituals, including the ageing of ritual participants, a weakening sense of cultural identity among younger generations, and the conflict between traditional rituals and the pace of modern life. In light of these issues, this study proposes that the transmission and innovation of rural ethnic and folk sports rituals should adopt a multi-stakeholder governance approach, thereby providing sustainable cultural support and a social foundation for the rural revitalisation strategy.

Keywords: Ethnic and Folk Sporting Rituals; Rural Society; Logic of Evolution; Modern Governance; Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

As a core component of rural social culture, ethnic folk sporting rituals not only embody a long history but also play a crucial role in shaping social relationships and cultural identity. In traditional Chinese villages, folk sporting rituals are often closely linked to the agricultural cycle, serving as a vehicle through which farmers express their beliefs and pray for bountiful harvests[1]. Whether in the competitive events of sacrificial rites or the competitive performances during festivals, these activities convey collectivism, solidarity and cooperation, as well as reverence for nature and the divine, through physical movement and interaction. However, with the relentless advance of modernisation, particularly the rapid

changes brought about by urbanisation and shifts in social structure, the forms and functions of traditional ethnic and folk sports rituals are gradually coming under threat. At the same time, modern society's perception of sporting activities has increasingly shifted towards entertainment and competition, to some extent diminishing the social functions and cultural value of traditional folk sports rituals[2]. The younger generation in rural areas is also gradually becoming estranged from these traditional activities, leading to a potential breakdown in cultural transmission and social cohesion within rural communities. This evolutionary process reflects the tension between modernisation and traditional culture, whilst also revealing the dilemma faced by rural societies in balancing economic development with cultural preservation.

In recent years, with the implementation of the national rural revitalisation strategy, the preservation and development of ethnic and folk sports rituals have encountered unprecedented opportunities. Folk sports rituals have not only become an integral part of local cultural identity but have also gradually evolved into a vital resource for attracting tourists and promoting local economic development[3]. However, against the backdrop of the rural revitalisation strategy, how to strike a balance between the preservation of traditional culture and modern demands remains a matter worthy of serious consideration. This requires us not only to focus on the formal transmission of these rituals, but also to place greater emphasis on the reconstruction of the cultural spirit and social significance underlying them. Therefore, exploring modern governance pathways for folk sports rituals is not only a necessity for cultural preservation, but also a task that cannot be overlooked within the rural revitalisation strategy.

2. The Historical Evolution of Ethnic and Folk Sports Rituals

2.1 Origins

The origins of ethnic and folk sporting rituals are often closely linked to religious beliefs, the worship of nature, and the productive and daily life of agrarian societies. In early rural societies, the agricultural production cycle had a decisive influence on people's lives; seasonal festivals, harvest celebrations and sacrificial rites not only marked key junctures in the calendar but also formed the basis for the integration of sporting activities with ritual[4]. For example, sacrificial rites performed before and after ploughing, and competitive events held to pray for a bountiful harvest, not only reflected farmers' reverence for nature and the deities, but also strengthened collective cohesion through competitive activities. Such rituals share common characteristics, including a strong religious and ceremonial nature, high levels of community participation, and a focus on practical daily life.

(1) Strong religious and ritualistic elements. Sporting activities are embedded within sacrificial rites, festivals or the worship of deities, and the activities themselves possess symbolic significance that transcends mere entertainment; (2) High levels of community participation. Participants are typically members of the village community, and the activities reinforce a sense of group identity and social networks; (3) A focus on everyday life. The rituals are closely linked to daily practices such as agriculture, fishing, hunting and handicraft production, reflecting a cyclical pattern of 'labour—celebration—sport'.

2.2 Developmental Process

(1) Primitive Ritual Stage: Early rituals centred on survival and production; sporting activities were simple, with loose rules, and were largely an extension of collective labour; (2) Institutionalisation Stage: With the stabilisation of social structures and the formation of clan organisations, sporting rituals began to become standardised. Competitive events, rules of play and reward and punishment systems gradually became defined; rituals not only expressed religious beliefs but also served as manifestations of social status and hierarchical relationships; (3) Cultural Symbol Stage: At this stage, folk sporting rituals gradually moved away from purely productive functions to become integral components of cultural events such as festivals, weddings and coming-of-age

ceremonies. Sporting activities became deeply integrated with cultural elements such as folklore, music and dance, and their symbolic significance was enhanced[5].

2.3 Analysis of Influencing Factors

(1) In terms of social structural factors, social structures such as the clan system, village self-governance and community hierarchies have influenced the organisational forms and patterns of participation in rituals. Families and clans often play a leading role in rituals, and the hierarchical order of rituals is closely linked to the social power structure[6]; (2) In terms of economic factors, the level of productivity and the state of economic development directly influence the scale, frequency and resource allocation of rituals. In agrarian societies, ceremonial activities are usually tied to economic events such as harvests and sacrifices; as economic conditions improve, ceremonies gradually evolve towards entertainment and display; (3) In terms of cultural factors, ethnic traditions, religious beliefs, oral literature and folk arts exert a profound influence on the form and content of ceremonies. The cultural backgrounds of different ethnic groups and regions determine the distinctive features, rules and symbolic significance of sporting ceremonies; (4) With regard to natural environmental factors, climate, geographical conditions and seasonal changes exert a constraining influence on the scheduling and content design of rituals. For instance, winter and the rainy season often see indoor or static ritual activities, whilst the harvest season is suited to outdoor competitions and communal celebrations. These factors interact to form the unique and complex historical logic of the evolution of ethnic folk sports rituals, enabling them to maintain traditional continuity whilst exhibiting characteristics of dynamic change within rural society.

3. Modern Transformation and Governance Approaches for Ethnic and Folk Sports Rituals

3.1 Modern Transformation of Ethnic and Folk Sports Rituals

(1) Transition from Productive to Cultural Functions

Traditional ethnic and folk sports rituals were predominantly centred on ensuring agricultural

production and celebrating harvests. With the development of the rural economy and the modernisation of production methods, agriculture is no longer the sole pillar of the socio-economy; consequently, the functions of these rituals have gradually shifted towards cultural heritage, community cohesion and entertainment[7]. Modernisation has led these rituals to gradually detach from their original productive activities, transforming them into venues for cultural display, traditional education and community interaction. For example, sporting competitions that were once confined to harvest festivals have now become part of local tourism and cultural festivals, serving as key elements in showcasing local characteristics, attracting visitors and promoting local economic development.

(2) The Transition from Religious Dependence to Diverse Social Expression

Many ethnic and folk sports rituals originated from religious beliefs, with their content and forms typically centred on sacrificial rites and the worship of deities. However, with the increasing diversity of modern society, the influence of traditional religious beliefs in people's lives has gradually waned, and the religious elements within these sports rituals have also begun to diminish. Instead, they now serve functions such as fostering cultural confidence, a sense of local identity, traditional virtues and social cohesion. Folk sports rituals have gradually evolved from purely religious ceremonies into expressions of cultural diversity, incorporating modern society's need for collective culture and social identity, and have become cultural activities that integrate education, entertainment and social interaction[8].

(3) The Transition from Isolated Rural Communities to Open Cities

In the past, ethnic and folk sports rituals typically took place within relatively isolated rural communities, with participants mainly comprising local villagers. However, with the development of modern transport, information technology and the internet, the spatial boundaries of these rituals have gradually expanded. Against the backdrop of urbanisation, folk sports rituals have progressively transcended the boundaries between rural and urban areas, becoming platforms for cultural exchange on a national and even international scale. For example, certain traditional sporting

events (such as wrestling and dragon boat racing) are no longer confined to local areas but have become cultural competitions on a national scale, and have even gained international recognition. With the development of media dissemination and the tourism industry, the audience for traditional sporting rituals has expanded significantly, giving rise to new forms such as cultural tourism and sporting performances. This transformation has altered their original ritualistic nature and brought about a broader social impact.

3.2 Modern Approaches to the Governance of Ethnic and Folk Sports Rituals

(1) Strengthening Cultural Preservation and Transmission

Cultural preservation forms the foundation for the sustainable development of ethnic and folk sports rituals. The government and society should strengthen the cultural protection of traditional sporting rituals by formulating relevant policies and regulations to ensure they are not forgotten or lost in modern society. For example, measures such as establishing cultural heritage conservation areas and compiling lists of intangible cultural heritage can ensure the effective transmission of traditional sporting activities. Furthermore, through the organisation of training courses and cultural exchange activities, the younger generation can be encouraged to better understand and participate in these sporting rituals, thereby stimulating their interest in and identification with traditional culture.

(2) Promoting community participation and multi-stakeholder collaboration

The governance of ethnic and folk sports rituals should not rely solely on government efforts, but also require the broad participation of communities and civil society. By encouraging participation from rural communities, non-governmental organisations and cultural institutions, these rituals can transcend mere entertainment and play a greater role in education, the preservation of history and social harmony. Through collective activities, social media campaigns and local cultural festivals, traditional sporting rituals can be closely integrated into modern life, transforming them into cultural events that embody local character and foster a sense of public participation.

(3) Emphasising Innovation and Adaptation to Modernity

In response to modern society's demand for entertainment and immersive experiences, traditional ethnic and folk sports rituals must also adapt to the times by innovating whilst preserving traditional elements. For instance, modern technological tools—such as live streaming and virtual reality—can be incorporated into traditional sports events, enabling more people to experience these cultural traditions through contemporary means. Furthermore, modern event organisation and management methods can enhance the professionalism and spectator appeal of these activities, thereby increasing their attractiveness, promoting their commercialisation and branding, and driving dual cultural and economic development.

(4) Promoting the integrated development of the local economy and the tourism industry

Ethnic and folk sports rituals possess distinct local characteristics and cultural value, presenting an opportunity for their integration with the local economy, particularly the tourism sector. By combining traditional sports rituals with local tourism resources, it is possible to enhance the region's appeal to visitors and boost economic benefits. For instance, sports activities organised in conjunction with traditional festivals can attract large numbers of tourists to visit and participate, thereby driving the comprehensive development of the local economy. In this process, the integration of appropriate market-oriented approaches with cultural preservation measures is of paramount importance.

4. Challenges and Dilemmas in Modern Society

4.1 The Erosion of Identity with Traditional Culture

(1) A Cultural Disconnect Among the Younger Generation

With the spread of urbanisation and modern education, the younger generation has had significantly fewer opportunities to encounter traditional folk sports rituals during their upbringing, leading to a decline in interest and identification with these cultural activities. Many young people regard modern sports and e-sports as their primary forms of entertainment, whilst lacking a deep understanding of ethnic folk sports rituals[9]. This cultural disconnect not only undermines the social foundations of these

rituals but also affects the continuity of their transmission.

(2) The Impact of Cultural Pluralism

Against the backdrop of globalisation, modern society's culture is characterised by a high degree of pluralism and openness. The impact of foreign and popular cultures has caused certain traditional ethnic sporting rituals to become gradually marginalised. In some regions, young people are more inclined to participate in modern competitions or international sporting events, whilst showing little interest in local traditional sporting activities; this, in turn, affects the rituals' appeal within the community and their role in fostering social cohesion.

4.2 Economic and Resource Constraints

(1) Insufficient Funding

Although ethnic and folk sports rituals possess significant cultural value, they often lack adequate economic support in modern society. Local governments and communities have limited funds to invest in cultural activities, resulting in a failure to provide the necessary maintenance and promotion for some traditional sports rituals. For instance, there are funding shortfalls in areas such as equipment renewal, venue construction, event organisation and publicity, which severely constrain the scale and quality of these activities.

(2) The Conflict Between Commercialisation and Cultural Preservation

In order to ensure the sustainable development of these rituals, some regions have attempted to commercialise them through measures such as tourism development, event ticketing and the sale of merchandise. However, excessive commercialisation risks diluting the cultural essence of the rituals themselves, reducing them to mere spectator performances. This tension between culture and economics has become an urgent issue requiring resolution in modern governance.

4.3 The Pace of Modern Life and Declining Participation

(1) An Accelerated Pace of Life

The rapid pace of urbanisation and the increasing demands of work and daily life have made it difficult for people to find the time to participate in traditional sporting rituals. Among urban residents in particular, such rituals often clash with the pressures of work, education and family life, leading to a decline in participation

and further weakening the social influence of these rituals.

(2) Changes in Social Interaction

Digitalisation and the information-driven lifestyle have altered people's social habits, diminishing the appeal of in-person group activities. Traditional sporting rituals typically rely on collective community participation and face-to-face interaction, whereas modern social interaction tends to favour virtual spaces; this, to a certain extent, limits the dissemination and continuation of such rituals[10].

4.4 Inadequate Institutional and Policy Support

(1) An Incomplete Policy Framework

Although both central and local governments have introduced policies for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, issues such as incomplete policy coverage, insufficient enforcement and uneven resource allocation persist during implementation. In some regions, a lack of scientific management and planning has led to the protection of traditional sporting rituals becoming a 'toothless' exercise.

(2) Shortage of Specialised Personnel

The transmission of ethnic and folk sports rituals requires not only financial and policy support but also specialised personnel. However, there is a scarcity of instructors, researchers and managers for traditional sports projects, resulting in a lack of systematic organisation of activities, technical training and cultural research, which in turn affects the quality and long-term development of these rituals.

4.5 Dilemmas in Social Perception and Value Assessment

(1) Cognitive Biases Regarding the Functions of Rituals

Certain social groups hold distorted perceptions of the value of ethnic and folk sports rituals, often viewing them merely as entertainment performances or tourist attractions, whilst overlooking their role in cultural transmission, community cohesion, educational functions and social governance[11]. Such cognitive biases have had adverse effects on resource allocation, policy prioritisation and levels of social participation.

(2) Lack of a Scientific Evaluation System

In modern society, the evaluation of cultural activities tends to focus on economic returns and audience numbers, whilst there is a lack of a

scientific and systematic set of evaluation indicators for the cultural value, educational value and social integration functions of traditional sports rituals. This makes it difficult for ethnic and folk sports rituals to secure the priority they deserve in policy-making and resource allocation.

5. Future Development Strategies and Pathways for Innovation

5.1 Strengthening Cultural Identity and Educational Transmission

(1) Strengthening Cultural Identity Among the Younger Generation

Amidst the waves of globalisation and urbanisation, the preservation of traditional cultural identity faces significant challenges. By optimising the education system, the cultural integration of ethnic and folk sports rituals can be enhanced at all levels, from primary to higher education. Relevant courses could be introduced in schools and communities, and students' awareness of and interest in ethnic sports could be fostered through cultural performances and extracurricular activities. At the same time, efforts should be made to encourage the incorporation of traditional sports rituals into locally distinctive curriculum frameworks, thereby bolstering the younger generation's cultural confidence.

(2) Utilising Modern Media for Cultural Dissemination

Modern media and social media serve as vital platforms for cultural dissemination. Showcasing ethnic and folk sports rituals through emerging media such as short-video platforms and live streaming not only attracts the attention of more young people but also generates a global cultural dissemination effect. Producing high-quality cultural documentaries or short-video series that narrate the cultural stories behind the history, techniques and rituals of ethnic sports can both capture public attention and enhance people's cultural awareness.

5.2 Increasing Resource Allocation and Support

(1) Government Policy Support and Funding

The preservation of ethnic and folk sports rituals requires greater policy support from the government. In addition to continuing to refine policies for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, specific funding schemes should be

established to support the preservation and transmission of these rituals. The government could set up a dedicated fund to cover the organisation of events, training of personnel, construction of facilities and maintenance of venues, thereby ensuring these traditional activities receive long-term support.

(2) Promoting the Integration of Social Capital and the Cultural Industry

Ethnic and folk sports rituals possess not only cultural value but also significant economic potential. Opportunities should be explored to integrate traditional sports with the cultural industry and tourism sector, developing sports events and cultural activities with local characteristics, such as festivals and demonstrations of traditional competitions. Whilst commercial operations can drive the revival of folk sports, care must be taken to preserve their cultural foundations and essence, avoiding excessive commercialisation that could lead to the ‘hollowing out’ of these rituals.

5.3 Enhancing the Modernisation and Technological Integration of Ceremonies

(1) Utilising Technology to Support the Innovation and Preservation of Sports Rituals

In the digital age, modern technology offers new avenues for the preservation and innovation of traditional culture. For instance, technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) can be used to recreate the settings of traditional sports rituals, allowing people to experience these cultural activities in a digital environment. Furthermore, 3D printing technology can be employed to reproduce traditional sports equipment, ensuring historical authenticity whilst facilitating the transmission and dissemination of these rituals.

(2) The Application of Smart Technology and Big Data

With the aid of big data analysis and smart management, ethnic and folk sports ceremonies can be planned and organised more efficiently. For instance, smart management platforms can be used to monitor participants and activities in real time and compile statistical data, thereby optimising event workflows and enhancing engagement and the participant experience. Furthermore, big data can help relevant authorities understand public interests and needs, enabling them to adjust the content and format of events based on data findings to better align with social trends and public demand.

5.4 Strengthening Cross-Sectoral Cooperation and Multi-Stakeholder Participation

(1) Establishing a multi-stakeholder collaboration mechanism

The protection and transmission of ethnic and folk sports rituals is a systematic undertaking that requires the joint participation of multiple stakeholders, including government, businesses, academic institutions and local communities. By establishing multi-stakeholder cooperation mechanisms and coordinating resources across all parties, a virtuous cycle can be created characterised by government leadership, market-driven initiatives and social participation. For example, cultural departments could collaborate with sports and tourism departments to jointly organise competitions and cultural events, thereby enhancing the multi-dimensional impact of such activities.

(2) The Central Role of Local Communities

Ethnic and folk sports rituals find their most fundamental breeding ground within local communities, and local residents should serve as the main force in their transmission. Local communities can organise distinctive local activities through the establishment of cultural heritage bases, traditional skills training classes, and intangible cultural heritage experience centres, thereby strengthening residents’ sense of cultural identity and pride[12]. Furthermore, local societies can also collaborate with organisations such as local chambers of commerce and cultural groups to promote the transmission and innovation of sports rituals.

5.5 Improving the Evaluation System and Policy Incentive Mechanisms

(1) Establishing a Scientific Evaluation System

The social benefits of traditional cultural activities cannot be measured solely in terms of economic returns; therefore, it is necessary to establish a scientific evaluation system to comprehensively assess the cultural value, educational functions and community impact of ethnic and folk sports rituals. Quantitative criteria will enable a more objective evaluation of the significance of these cultural activities, thereby providing a basis for policy adjustments and financial support.

(2) Incentive Mechanisms and Recognition Schemes

Incentive mechanisms should be formulated to encourage more civil society organisations and

individuals to engage in the preservation and innovation of ethnic and folk sports rituals. Through cultural awards, the selection of outstanding inheritors, and funding for innovative projects, organisations and individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the preservation, innovation and promotion of ethnic sports can be recognised, thereby enhancing the enthusiasm and sense of responsibility among all sectors of society.

6. Conclusion

As an integral part of Chinese culture, ethnic and folk sports rituals embody a wealth of historical memory, social values and cultural identity. Their development requires both respect for the essence of traditional culture and alignment with contemporary social trends; sustainable development can only be achieved through institutional safeguards, technical support, social participation and cultural innovation. Only with the combined support of cultural identity, resource security, pathways for innovation and multi-stakeholder collaboration can ethnic and folk sports rituals continue to pass on their unique value in modern society, serving as vital cultural bridges connecting history with the future, and the local with the global.

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