

# HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE DRAGON LANTERN AUSPICIOUS PHRASES FORMATION DANCE, 1731-PRESENT

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**Abstract.** The Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) is a distinctive form of dragon dance originating from Zhongyi Village, Hebei Province, characterized by its ability to form auspicious Chinese characters through coordinated manipulation of a segmented dragon body. This article examines the historical transformation of DLCAPFD from its origins within the Qing Dynasty imperial mausoleum ritual system to its contemporary status as a nationally recognized and actively practiced intangible cultural heritage. Using historical analysis and a cultural heritage perspective, this study traces DLCAPFD across four major historical phases: its institutionalization as a ritual performance reinforcing imperial authority during the Qing Dynasty (1731–1912); its adaptation as a community-based folk tradition following the collapse of imperial institutions (1912–1949); its disruption and revival during the socialist and reform periods (1949–2008); and its institutionalization and continued practice within contemporary heritage preservation frameworks (2008–present). The findings demonstrate that DLCAPFD’s continuity was sustained through cultural adaptation, community transmission, and embodied cultural memory, rather than uninterrupted institutional support. In the contemporary period, institutional recognition and heritage policies have strengthened its preservation, while community participation has ensured its continued vitality. This study argues that DLCAPFD exemplifies the dynamic nature of intangible cultural heritage as a living cultural practice shaped by the interaction between cultural memory, community agency, and institutional recognition across changing historical contexts.

**Keywords:** *dragon lantern dance, intangible cultural heritage, cultural memory, heritage institutionalization, traditional performance*

## Introduction

Traditional performance practices constitute an important component of intangible cultural heritage, reflecting the interaction between cultural expression, political authority, and social identity. Rather than existing as static survivals from the past, these practices function as dynamic cultural systems shaped by changing institutional structures, ideological conditions, and community participation. In China, dragon dance represents one of the most prominent forms of traditional performance, symbolizing cosmological harmony, political legitimacy, and collective cultural identity. While widely recognized as a representative element of Chinese folk culture, regional variations of dragon dance exhibit distinctive structural, symbolic, and historical characteristics shaped by specific local and institutional contexts. One such distinctive form is the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD), originating in Zhongyi Village, Yixian County, Hebei Province. Unlike conventional dragon dances that emphasize acrobatic display and visual spectacle, DLCAPFD is characterized by its ability to form auspicious Chinese characters through coordinated manipulation of a segmented dragon body. These formations transform collective bodily

movement into a symbolic medium capable of conveying cultural meanings associated with peace, prosperity, and moral order. This integration of textual representation, ritual symbolism, and coordinated performance distinguishes DLCAPFD as a unique variation within the broader tradition of Chinese dragon dance. As a traditional performance practice with origins in imperial ritual and continued existence in contemporary heritage frameworks, DLCAPFD provides an important case for examining the relationship between cultural practice, political authority, and institutional transformation. Its long-term continuity raises important questions regarding how traditional performance practices survive across changing political regimes, adapt to shifting institutional environments, and acquire new meanings within modern heritage preservation systems. This article aims to examine the historical transformation of DLCAPFD from its origins within the Qing Dynasty imperial ritual system to its contemporary status as a nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage. Specifically, it analyses the changing institutional, social, and cultural functions of DLCAPFD across successive historical periods and examines the mechanisms that enabled its continuity. By doing so, this study contributes to broader discussions on the transformation, transmission, and institutionalization of intangible cultural heritage in modern China.

### *Literature review*

Dragon dance is an important form of Chinese traditional performance, symbolizing cosmological harmony, political authority, and cultural continuity. Historically associated with ritual practice and imperial governance, dragon performances functioned as symbolic expressions reinforcing social order and collective identity. Among these traditions, the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) represents a distinctive variation characterized by its ability to form auspicious Chinese characters using a segmented dragon body. These formations convey symbolic meanings associated with peace, prosperity, and moral governance, reflecting the integration of textual symbolism and embodied performance (Zhang, 1989). Historical studies indicate that DLCAPFD originated within the Qing Dynasty imperial mausoleum system, particularly in the Western Qing Tombs established in 1731. Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the tradition was preserved and transmitted within village communities, ensuring its continuity despite institutional disruption (Zhang and Li, 2020). Its revival and recognition as intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and 2008 reflect broader heritage preservation efforts in contemporary China (Ye and Zhou, 2013; UNESCO, 2003). However, existing scholarship has largely focused on descriptive accounts, with limited analysis of DLCAPFD's historical transformation across changing political and institutional contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining the roles of cultural adaptation, community transmission, and institutional recognition in sustaining DLCAPFD as intangible cultural heritage.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative historical research approach to examine the transformation of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) across changing political and institutional contexts from 1731 to the present. The research is based on documentary analysis of published academic studies, historical records, local cultural documentation, and intangible cultural heritage materials related to DLCAPFD and the Western Qing Tombs region. These sources

include scholarly works on dragon dance traditions, local historical accounts, and heritage preservation documents that provide evidence of the performance's origins, transmission, and contemporary practice. The periodization adopted in this study reflects major political and institutional transitions that significantly influenced the social function and cultural status of DLCAPFD. The analysis is structured across four key historical phases: its institutionalization within the Qing Dynasty imperial ritual system (1731–1912); its transmission as a community-based folk tradition following the collapse of imperial authority (1912–1949); its disruption and subsequent revival during the socialist and reform periods (1949–2008); and its institutionalization and continued practice within contemporary intangible cultural heritage frameworks (2008–present). This periodization enables systematic examination of how political transformation, social change, and heritage governance shaped the continuity and adaptation of DLCAPFD. The analysis is informed by theoretical perspectives on cultural memory (Assmann, 2011) and heritage institutionalization (Smith, 2006), which provide conceptual frameworks for understanding how traditional performance practices are preserved, reinterpreted, and sustained. By integrating historical analysis with cultural heritage theory, this study examines DLCAPFD as both a historical ritual practice and a living cultural heritage shaped by evolving institutional and social contexts.

## Results and Discussion

### *Imperial origins: DLCAPFD within Qing Dynasty ritual structure (1731–1912)*

The origins of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) can be traced to the early Qing Dynasty, specifically to the construction of the Western Qing Tombs beginning in 1731 during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng in Yixian County, Baoding City, Hebei Province. The Qing imperial mausoleum system required ceremonial performances to reinforce imperial authority, ritual order, and cosmological harmony. As part of these ceremonial activities, dragon lantern performances were introduced to provide ritual entertainment and symbolic expression within the imperial mausoleum complex. Existing studies indicate that DLCAPFD developed from earlier dragon lantern traditions and was distinguished by its unique ability to arrange Chinese characters using the dragon's segmented body, allowing performers to visually express auspicious phrases conveying blessings, prosperity, and social harmony (Zhang, 1989). The introduction and institutionalization of DLCAPFD were closely linked to imperial administrative and ritual arrangements within the Qing mausoleum system. When the Western Qing Tombs were first established, the relocated officers and soldiers stationed there experienced a lack of cultural and recreational activities. To address this, Emperor Qianlong issued a decree transferring dragon dance performers and dragon lantern props from the Eastern Qing Tombs to the Western Qing Tombs. These performers, originally attached to imperial service, brought with them dragon lantern traditions that gradually evolved into the distinctive DLCAPFD form. The performance was initially administered by the Ritual Department of the Western Tombs and later relocated across several sites, including Huabei Village, Long Quanzhuang Village, and eventually Zhongyi Village during the reign of Emperor Guangxu. Through this process, DLCAPFD became firmly embedded within the ritual structure of the Qing imperial mausoleum system.

DLCAPFD differed significantly from conventional dragon dances due to its distinctive structural and symbolic characteristics. According to oral accounts preserved

by inheritors and documented in historical studies, the original performance prop consisted of a continuous dragon structure. During the Yongzheng period (1722–1735), this structure was transformed into a twelve-segment dragon, symbolizing the twelve months of the year and reinforcing cosmological symbolism associated with imperial time and authority (Li and Xu, 2016). During the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1796), the dragon body was further expanded to thirteen segments to commemorate Yongzheng’s thirteen-year reign, thereby strengthening its symbolic association with imperial legitimacy and historical continuity. This segmented structure enabled performers to manipulate the dragon body with greater flexibility, allowing them to create Chinese characters and auspicious phrases through coordinated bodily movement. Such formations, including phrases such as “Peace in the world” (天下太平) and “Fair and upright” (正大光明), visually reinforced imperial ideology and conveyed messages of political stability and moral governance (Zhang, 1989). The incorporation of character-based formations and candle-lit dragon lanterns further enhanced the ritual and symbolic significance of DLCAPFD. Candle devices were installed within the dragon lantern segments, illuminating the dragon during nighttime performances and producing a visually striking spectacle that emphasized its ceremonial importance (Liu, 2011; Zhang, 1989). The use of illuminated dragon lanterns was closely associated with Qing Dynasty court rituals and mausoleum ceremonial performances, particularly those conducted in the Western Qing Tombs area. These performances were accompanied by traditional musical instruments, further enhancing their ceremonial atmosphere and reinforcing their ritual function.

The association of DLCAPFD with imperial ritual enhanced its institutional legitimacy and symbolic prestige. Historical accounts indicate that Dowager Empress Cixi personally observed DLCAPFD performances and rewarded performers with dragon costumes and specialized performance equipment, including red candle devices used to house the dragon lantern segments (Liu, 2011; Zhang, 1989). Such imperial recognition elevated DLCAPFD beyond mere entertainment and established it as an integral component of court ceremonial culture. Within this context, DLCAPFD functioned as a symbolic performance reinforcing imperial authority, cosmic harmony, and social order. It served both ritual and political functions, visually expressing the legitimacy and stability of Qing imperial rule.

### ***Folk transformation: Community transmission after the collapse of imperial authority (1912–1949)***

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 marked a major turning point in the historical trajectory of DLCAPFD. With the dissolution of imperial institutions, the mausoleum administrative system that had supported ritual performances was gradually dismantled. As a result, mausoleum guards and ritual performers lost their official positions and returned to village life as farmers and laborers. Despite the loss of imperial patronage, these individuals continued to practice and transmit DLCAPFD within their local communities, ensuring its survival beyond the imperial system (Zhang and Li, 2020). During this transitional period, DLCAPFD underwent a significant transformation in social function and cultural meaning. Originally performed as part of imperial court rituals and mausoleum ceremonies, it gradually became integrated into local religious and communal practices. Annual training began in the twelfth lunar month, during which performers taught dragon dance techniques, formation methods, and character composition to younger generations (Liu, 2011; Zhang, 1989). On the

fourth day of the first lunar month, performing teams would conduct ritual performances known as “Chuhui” (出会), visiting local officials and temples to offer New Year greetings and perform auspicious character formations. These activities reflected the continuation of ritual elements while adapting to new community-based contexts. As DLCAPFD became embedded within village life, its ritual and social functions expanded. Rather than serving imperial ceremonial purposes, performances were conducted during village festivals, temple fairs, and inter-village cultural exchanges. Prior to performances, villagers often constructed temporary ritual structures to worship local deities, followed by dragon dance performances to entertain both gods and community members. These practices demonstrated the transformation of DLCAPFD from an imperial ritual performance into a community-centered folk tradition.

Following the disbandment of imperial mausoleum institutions in the 1920s, former mausoleum guards continued transmitting DLCAPFD as part of local cultural practice (Zhang and Li, 2020). Through this process, DLCAPFD became increasingly integrated into the social and cultural fabric of rural communities. Performances were conducted to pray for favorable weather, agricultural prosperity, and communal well-being. The dragon, long associated with rain and agricultural fertility, became a symbol of communal protection and prosperity rather than imperial authority. During the later period of the Anti-Japanese War (1940–1945), DLCAPFD acquired additional social significance. As Zhongyi Village became part of guerrilla-controlled areas, performance played an important role in maintaining social cohesion and facilitating inter-village communication (Yan, 2010; Zhang, 1989). Dragon dance performances served as occasions for communal gathering, reinforcing collective identity and cultural continuity during a period of political instability and wartime disruption. Annual performance cycles became closely linked to agricultural rhythms. Following the autumn harvest, villagers organized practice sessions during the winter months in preparation for New Year performances. These performances involved ritual greetings, inter-village exchanges, and worship activities at temples and other sacred sites. Through these practices, DLCAPFD became fully integrated into community life, serving as both cultural expression and social institution.

Viewed through the lens of historical anthropology, the period between the Yongzheng reign and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 represents a critical phase of transformation in DLCAPFD’s historical development. During this period, DLCAPFD evolved from an imperial ritual performance administered by court institutions into a community-based folk tradition sustained through local transmission. While its original association with imperial authority diminished, its symbolic and cultural significance persisted, allowing it to survive major political and social transformations. This transformation demonstrates the adaptive resilience of traditional cultural practices and highlights the dynamic relationship between political authority, cultural practice, and social continuity.

### ***Suppression, disruption, and revival: DLCAPFD under socialist transformation and heritage institutionalization (1949–2008)***

Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, traditional cultural practices entered a new political and ideological environment that profoundly shaped their development and survival. Initially, DLCAPFD continued to be practiced as a community-based cultural activity, reflecting the persistence of local cultural

traditions despite the broader political transformation of Chinese society. According to Li and Yin (2018), between 1949 and 1958, DLCAPFD remained an active performance tradition in Zhongyi Village, with performers primarily consisting of young and middle-aged men between the ages of 30 and 40. Participation was voluntary, and practice sessions were typically held during the agricultural slack season, particularly in the summer months when farming demands were reduced. During this early socialist period, DLCAPFD largely functioned as a cultural and entertainment activity rather than a religious or sacrificial ritual. Performances were primarily conducted during the Chinese New Year and other festive occasions, serving to enhance community cohesion and cultural life. The core performative elements of DLCAPFD, including the formation of auspicious phrases such as “Peace in the world” (天下太平) and “Fair and upright” (正大光明), remained consistent with earlier historical traditions, demonstrating continuity in symbolic meaning despite changing political conditions (Li and Yin, 2018). The performance team during this period was relatively large, consisting of approximately 16 dragon dancers and around 10 musical accompanists, totaling nearly 30 participants. Performers wore simple costumes, typically green cloth garments and white head towels, reflecting the modest material conditions of rural communities at the time. While the performance retained its traditional structure and character-based formation system, its association with religious rituals was significantly reduced, and it increasingly functioned as a secular cultural performance aligned with community entertainment and social cohesion (Li and Yin, 2018).

However, this period of relative continuity was short-lived, as broader political and economic campaigns soon disrupted the transmission and practice of traditional cultural forms. Beginning in 1958, the Great Leap Forward and the establishment of the People’s Commune system profoundly altered rural social and economic structures. Agricultural collectivization, combined with severe natural disasters between 1959 and 1960, created widespread economic hardship and social disruption. These conditions significantly reduced opportunities for cultural activities, including traditional performances such as DLCAPFD, which required time, resources, and collective participation (Yan and Chiou, 2021; Zou, 2020). The situation worsened further during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a political movement that sought to eliminate what were perceived as remnants of feudal, traditional, and superstitious culture. During this period, dragon-related cultural practices, including dragon dance, were explicitly targeted due to their symbolic association with traditional belief systems and pre-socialist cultural values. According to Yan and Chiou (2021) as well as Zou (2020), DLCAPFD was classified as a form of superstition and was therefore suspended. Performers ceased practicing, and the systematic transmission of performance techniques between generations was interrupted. Liu Baoqi, a recognized inheritor of DLCAPFD, recalled that the ideological environment of the Cultural Revolution discouraged engagement with traditional cultural practices, as communities were compelled to prioritize political conformity and economic survival over cultural preservation. This period represented a critical crisis in the historical continuity of DLCAPFD. Without opportunities for regular practice and transmission, the performance tradition faced the risk of permanent disappearance. The interruption of intergenerational transmission created a generational gap, as younger members of the community were unable to learn the complex formation techniques, movement coordination, and symbolic choreography associated with DLCAPFD. This disruption illustrates the vulnerability of traditional cultural practices to ideological and political

intervention, particularly when such practices are perceived as incompatible with dominant political narratives.

Despite this period of suppression, cultural memory of DLCAPFD persisted within the community. Former performers retained knowledge of movement patterns, character formations, and performance structure, even though formal performances were suspended. This preservation of embodied cultural knowledge played a crucial role in enabling the eventual revival of DLCAPFD in the reform era. The revival of DLCAPFD was closely linked to the broader political and economic reforms initiated under China's Reform and Opening policy beginning in 1978. This new policy environment marked a significant shift in the government's approach to traditional culture. Rather than viewing traditional cultural practices as ideological threats, the state increasingly recognized them as valuable components of national cultural identity and heritage. Improved economic conditions and rising living standards created favorable conditions for the revival of local cultural traditions across rural China, including Hebei Province (Li and Yin, 2018; Li and Xu, 2016). In Zhongyi Village, the revival of DLCAPFD was driven primarily by local cultural inheritors and community members. Key figures such as Liu Baoqi, Zheng Qingkun, and Cui Quanli played critical roles in reconstructing the performance tradition by teaching younger generations and reorganizing performance teams. Through their efforts, DLCAPFD was successfully revived by the year 2000, marking a significant milestone in its modern historical development. The New Year performance in 2000 represented the most important revival event in the contemporary history of DLCAPFD, symbolizing the restoration of a cultural tradition that had been suppressed for several decades (Li and Yin, 2018; Li and Xu, 2016).

The revival period also witnessed significant changes in the composition and structure of the performance team. Due to rural-to-urban migration and declining rural populations, younger male participants became less available. As a result, women began to participate in DLCAPFD performances, marking a significant departure from earlier historical practice in which participation had been restricted to men. This change reflected broader social transformations associated with modernization, urbanization, and changing gender roles in rural Chinese society (Li and Xu, 2016). In addition to community-driven revival, external factors such as tourism and cultural policy played increasingly important roles in shaping the modern development of DLCAPFD. Beginning in 2003, Zhongyi Village experienced increased tourism due to its proximity to the Western Qing Tombs, a historically significant imperial heritage site. This development created new opportunities for cultural performance, as DLCAPFD became integrated into tourism-related cultural activities. As a result, the performance gradually transitioned from a purely community-based folk tradition into a form of cultural presentation associated with heritage tourism and regional identity (Zhang and Li, 2020; Yan, 2010). Government recognition and institutional support further strengthened the position of DLCAPFD as a protected cultural tradition. In June 2006, DLCAPFD was officially designated as a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage project. This designation was followed by its inclusion in the national intangible cultural heritage list in June 2008, marking a major milestone in its institutional recognition and preservation (Zhang and Li, 2020; Yan, 2010). These designations provided financial support, policy protection, and public recognition, ensuring the continued survival and promotion of DLCAPFD within contemporary Chinese cultural policy frameworks.

The institutionalization of DLCAPFD as intangible cultural heritage represented a fundamental transformation in its historical trajectory. Originally developed as a court

ritual performance, later transformed into a community-based folk tradition, and subsequently suppressed during socialist political campaigns, DLCAPFD was now officially recognized as a valuable cultural asset worthy of preservation. This transformation illustrates the dynamic relationship between political authority, cultural practice, and social identity. Viewed from a historical perspective, the period between 1949 and 2008 represents a phase of disruption, adaptation, and institutional reintegration. DLCAPFD survived ideological suppression, social transformation, and economic modernization through a combination of community transmission, cultural memory, and institutional support. Its successful revival and recognition as intangible cultural heritage demonstrates the resilience of traditional cultural practices and their capacity to adapt to changing political, social, and cultural environments. Since its designation as national intangible cultural heritage, DLCAPFD has continued to be performed during festivals, cultural exhibitions, and heritage promotion events. Local cultural authorities and community inheritors have played an active role in transmitting performance techniques to younger generations, ensuring continuity of the tradition. In this contemporary context, DLCAPFD functions not only as a preserved cultural form but also as a living heritage practice that connects historical tradition with modern cultural identity.

### ***Contemporary relevance and heritage practice (2008–Present)***

The designation of DLCAPFD as provincial intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and national intangible cultural heritage in 2008 initiated a new phase in its historical development, characterized by formal institutional protection and expanded cultural recognition. This recognition formed part of China's broader intangible cultural heritage preservation framework, which developed rapidly following the country's participation in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004. The Convention established international standards for safeguarding traditional cultural practices through documentation, transmission, and community participation, prompting China to implement systematic national heritage protection policies (Xu et al., 2022; Ye and Zhou, 2013; UNESCO, 2003). Since its official recognition, DLCAPFD has continued to be actively practiced and transmitted within Zhongyi Village and surrounding communities. The continuity of the tradition relies heavily on cultural inheritors and local practitioners who transmit performance techniques, symbolic formations, and choreographic structures to younger generations through embodied teaching and community participation. Such community-based transmission reflects a fundamental characteristic of intangible cultural heritage, in which collective memory, ritual practice, and intergenerational learning sustain cultural continuity beyond formal institutional frameworks. Studies on Chinese dragon dance heritage have similarly demonstrated that ritual practice and collective participation play a crucial role in preserving performance traditions and reinforcing community cultural identity (Dang et al., 2021).

Institutional support has further strengthened the preservation and dissemination of DLCAPFD in the contemporary period. Government cultural agencies, local authorities, and heritage organizations have provided financial support, organizational resources, and opportunities for public performance. These measures reflect broader national efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage as part of cultural policy and identity construction. Research indicates that since the early twenty-first century, China has significantly expanded its intangible cultural heritage protection system, emphasizing

preservation, revitalization, and integration with contemporary social and cultural life (Helen, 2016). In addition to preservation, DLCAPFD has also acquired new roles within contemporary cultural and social contexts. It is performed during cultural festivals, heritage exhibitions, and public celebrations, allowing broader audiences to engage with traditional performance culture. Heritage tourism associated with the Western Qing Tombs has also contributed to the continued relevance of DLCAPFD, providing opportunities for performance while reinforcing the historical and cultural identity of the region (Xu et al., 2025). These contemporary performance contexts demonstrate how intangible cultural heritage practices adapt to modern cultural environments while maintaining continuity with historical traditions. At the same time, contemporary practice has involved adaptation to changing social conditions, demographic shifts, and modernization. As rural populations experience mobility and economic transformation, participation in DLCAPFD has expanded beyond its traditional performer base to include younger participants and women, reflecting broader social changes. Such adaptation demonstrates the dynamic nature of intangible cultural heritage as a living cultural system rather than a fixed historical relic. Scholars have emphasized that intangible cultural heritage survives through continuous reinterpretation and adaptation, enabling traditional practices to remain relevant within contemporary social contexts while preserving their core symbolic meanings (Ye et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the contemporary preservation of DLCAPFD reflects the broader integration of intangible cultural heritage into modern cultural governance and national identity formation. In recent decades, China has developed comprehensive institutional and policy frameworks to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, reflecting its growing importance within national cultural policy and identity construction. The protection of such traditions involves not only documentation and preservation but also revitalization, public participation, and institutional support, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society (Tan, 2018; Yan, 2010). These efforts demonstrate the role of heritage preservation in reinforcing cultural continuity while integrating traditional practices into modern cultural and governance structures. Viewed within its full historical context, DLCAPFD's continued practice in the present day illustrates the successful transformation of a traditional ritual performance into a living heritage sustained through the interaction of community transmission, institutional protection, and cultural policy framework. Its survival across imperial, socialist, and contemporary periods demonstrates the resilience of intangible cultural heritage and highlights the dynamic processes through which traditional cultural practices are preserved, adapted, and integrated into modern cultural life. The contemporary vitality of DLCAPFD confirms that intangible cultural heritage is not merely a remnant of the past, but an evolving cultural practice that continues to shape and express collective identity in the present.

### ***Cultural resilience, political transformation, and heritage institutionalization***

The historical evolution of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) illustrates the complex processes through which traditional performance practices persist, adapt, and acquire new meanings across changing political and institutional contexts. Rather than existing as passive survivals from earlier historical periods, traditional performances such as DLCAPFD operate as active cultural systems continuously shaped by political authority, social organization,

and community agency. Its continuity across imperial, socialist, and contemporary heritage preservation frameworks demonstrates the adaptive resilience of intangible cultural heritage and highlights the dynamic interaction between cultural practice and shifting structures of power and governance. During the Qing Dynasty, DLCAPFD functioned within a clearly defined institutional and ideological structure as part of imperial mausoleum ceremonial practice. Its performance was not merely an artistic activity but served as a ritual instrument reinforcing imperial authority and cosmological order. The choreographic formation of auspicious Chinese characters, such as phrases associated with peace, prosperity, and moral governance, visually communicated political ideals aligned with imperial legitimacy. In this context, DLCAPFD exemplifies what Hobsbawm (1983) describes as the “invention of tradition,” in which ritual practices are deliberately formalized to reinforce political continuity and social stability. By embedding symbolic messages within choreographic performance, DLCAPFD functioned simultaneously as cultural expression and political representation, reinforcing the ideological authority of the Qing state.

The collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 marked a fundamental shift in the institutional environment that had previously sustained DLCAPFD. With the dismantling of imperial mausoleum administrative structures, the performance lost its formal association with state authority and its institutional role within imperial ritual systems. However, rather than disappearing, DLCAPFD was preserved and transmitted by former mausoleum personnel and village residents, illustrating a process of social recontextualization in which cultural practices detached from state institutions were reinterpreted and sustained within community contexts. This transition reflects what Assmann (2011) conceptualizes as cultural memory, whereby traditions are preserved through embodied practice, intergenerational transmission, and collective memory rather than formal institutional support. Through continued performance in village festivals and communal activities, DLCAPFD acquired new social functions, reinforcing community cohesion, expressing collective identity, and maintaining cultural continuity. Despite the loss of its original institutional framework, embodied knowledge and community participation ensured the survival of the tradition, demonstrating the resilience of intangible cultural practices sustained through local agency. The socialist period between 1949 and 1978 introduced new ideological and political conditions that disrupted traditional cultural practices. Campaigns such as the Cultural Revolution sought to eliminate cultural forms associated with pre-socialist belief systems, resulting in the temporary suspension of DLCAPFD. This interruption illustrates the vulnerability of traditional performance practices when confronted with political movements that seek to restructure cultural expression according to ideological priorities. However, the survival of DLCAPFD despite this disruption demonstrates the importance of informal cultural transmission and community-based preservation. Knowledge of performance techniques, character formations, and symbolic meanings was retained within the memories and practices of elder practitioners, allowing the tradition to survive beyond the period of active suppression. This continuity highlights the role of community agency and cultural memory in sustaining intangible cultural heritage even in the absence of formal institutional recognition.

The reform era after 1978 marked a significant transformation in the political and cultural status of traditional performance practices. As state policy increasingly emphasized cultural preservation and national identity, traditional forms such as DLCAPFD were redefined as valuable cultural heritage rather than ideological remnants

of the past. The revival of DLCAPFD during this period reflects both grassroots cultural initiative and broader institutional support. Its designation as provincial and national intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and 2008 represents a process of formal institutionalization through which cultural practices are identified, protected, and integrated into contemporary heritage governance systems. This process aligns with Smith (2006) argument that heritage is not simply inherited from the past but actively construed through contemporary social and political processes, in which cultural practices are selectively preserved and reinterpreted to serve present-day cultural, educational, and identity-related purposes. The transformation of DLCAPFD across these historical phases shows that the survival of intangible cultural heritage depends on both continuity and adaptation. While its institutional context changed significantly, shifting from an imperial ritual system to a community-based tradition and later to formally recognized cultural heritage, its core choreographic structure and symbolic functions were preserved. This continuity was sustained through community participation, which ensured the transmission of embodied performance knowledge across generations. At the same time, institutional recognition in the contemporary period provided new structural support, enabling DLCAPFD to acquire renewed visibility and legitimacy within modern cultural and heritage frameworks. As Smith (2006) emphasizes, heritage institutionalization not only safeguards cultural practices but also reshapes their meanings, positioning them within contemporary narratives of cultural identity and historical continuity.

Importantly, the institutionalization of DLCAPFD as intangible cultural heritage did not simply preserve an unchanged tradition but also reshaped its cultural function and social significance. Once embedded within imperial ritual structures and later sustained as a community-based folk practice, DLCAPFD has now become part of a broader heritage system that emphasizes preservation, cultural education, and public representation. This transformation reflects the evolving relationship between cultural practice and political authority, demonstrating how traditional performances are continuously reinterpreted and recontextualized in response to changing historical conditions and institutional frameworks. This analysis fulfils the objective of this study by demonstrating that DLCAPFD's continuity was achieved not through uninterrupted institutional support, but through adaptive transformation across successive political and social environments. Its survival depended on the interaction between community-based transmission, embodied cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), and later institutional recognition and heritage construction processes (Smith, 2006). The historical trajectory of DLCAPFD illustrates how intangible cultural heritage is sustained through ongoing processes of reinterpretation, transmission, and institutionalization. As such, DLCAPFD provides an important case study for understanding the mechanisms through which traditional performance practices persist, adapt, and acquire renewed relevance across changing historical and political contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that the historical transformation of the Dragon Lantern Chinese Auspicious Phrases Formation Dance (DLCAPFD) was shaped by changing political, institutional, and social contexts, while its core symbolic and performative structure remained intact. In addressing the objective of examining the shifting institutional and cultural functions of DLCAPFD, the findings show that its continuity

was sustained not through uninterrupted institutional support, but through processes of cultural adaptation, community transmission, and embodied cultural memory. Following the collapse of the Qing imperial system, DLCAPFD was preserved by local communities, enabling its survival beyond its original ritual context. Despite ideological disruption during the socialist period, performance knowledge was maintained and later revitalized under reform-era cultural policies. The formal recognition of DLCAPFD as intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and 2008 marked a significant shift in its institutional status, integrating the tradition into contemporary heritage preservation frameworks. In the present day, its continued practice reflects the interaction between community participation and institutional support, ensuring both cultural continuity and contemporary relevance. These findings confirm that intangible cultural heritage is not sustained through static preservation, but through ongoing processes of reinterpretation, transmission, and institutionalization. More broadly, DLCAPFD provides an important case study demonstrating how traditional performance practices survive and acquire renewed significance across changing political and cultural environments, highlighting the dynamic relationship between cultural memory, community agency, and heritage governance in sustaining intangible cultural heritage.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research.

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