



Exploration and Analysis on the Development of Chinese Dragon Dance and the Training System of Dragon Dancing in Universities

Qi Zhang

Guangzhou College of Technology and Business (Huadou campus), Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.

How to cite this paper: Qi Zhang. (2023) Exploration and Analysis on the Development of Chinese Dragon Dance and the Training System of Dragon Dancing in Universities. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 7(2), 461-464. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2023.02.040

Received: January 30, 2023

Accepted: February 26, 2023

Published: March 31, 2023

***Corresponding author:** Qi Zhang, Guangzhou College of Technology and Business (Huadou campus), Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.

Abstract

Dragon has been considered as the avatar of god, which can give rise to cloud and rain. Thus, it plays a leading role in ritual of praying for rain. Long before Shang Dynasty (BC1600-BC1046), ancient Chinese people prayed for rain with a shaman. If she failed, her life would be sacrificed to the king of dragon (the God of Rain in Chinese mythology). Until Han Dynasty (BC220-206), the ritual praying for rain has evolved to an activity where eight people held paper dragon running like a flying dragon. At that period, dragon dancing has become a ritual with certain scale. Dragon dancing ritual has been inherited for thousands of years and its functional meaning has been transformed a lot. Changes have been taking place in dragon dancing array, dragon dancing method, and the gender of dancers and the training methods. In this article, firstly, it will analyze the studies on the transformation of dragon dancing from ancient times to present, particularly the gender transformation of dragon dancer. Secondly, it will explore the reasons why dragon dancing has been inherited for thousands of years and some social factors. Thirdly, it introduces the performance and current living situation of dragon dancers. In the end, this article will explore the training system of dragon dancing in universities and rural areas.

Keywords

Dragon Dancing, Gender Transformation of Dragon Dancer, Dragon Dancing in Universities

1. Introduction

In traditional agricultural society, people's daily life could be guaranteed if there was good weather for crops on time and a bumper grain harvest. However, the weather was not always as good as people's expectation because drought weather had always existed in traditional Chinese society. The ancient people were lack of cognitive ability and transforming capacity on nature as they would summarize accidental event or wrong association and took these reasoning as reliable experience. On such basis, the ancient divination ritual and various worship activities were very popular (Qianping Jiang, 2015), one of which was rituals praying for rain. Due to the absolute reliance of agriculture on rain, sorcery praying for rain has become an important part in agricultural society.

2. The connection between modern dragon dancing and traditional dragon dancing and its transformation

In the heart of Chinese people, the dragon is both an auspicious and powerful animal; people revere it and hold solemn ritual for its asylum when suffering floods and droughts (Jianmin Kang, 2012), since it acts as the master of rains. Dragon dancing activities can be dated back to "the praying ritual for rain" in the ancient times, because lifestyles of people in ancient times included earliest collecting, hunting and later agriculture and animal husbandry could be associated with weathers. If the weather was favorable, grain and people's stable life could be guaranteed. Therefore, worshipping ritual was grandly performed for the blessing. From ancient times, people considered dragon as the master of wind and rain. The praying method at that time was that people imitated the dancing manner of dragon to pray for the rain (Jianwei Wang, 2000). In Shang dynasty, if the shaman failed to get the rain, she would be presented to the Dragon King. This is the earliest sprout model of dragon dancing. According to Bell Catherine (1997), theories of sacrifice have tended to focus on the "communion" it is thought to afford between humans and gods. The shaman who danced dragon dance and sacrificed to king of dragon was the center of the communication between humans and gods. In Han dynasty, dragon dancing became a ritual of praying for rain and performance programs. The dragon dancing in the Han dynasty of China boasted large scale and was guided by some professional people (Chuanfei Tu, 2010).

After the evolution of history, dragon dancing has become a kind of blessing ritual and sport. When the holiday comes, people usually pray for the peace and prosperity of the nation. The lifelike dragon lanterns can bring people with happy and peaceful festival air. Meanwhile, dragon dancing has been developed into a kind of athletic sport. The dragon dancing associations are established under the sponsorship of government and the dragon dancing activities are held regularly. In the competitive sport of dragon dancing, women gradually involve in such sport, thus producing women dragon dancing team (Xiwen Luo, 2011). Under the influence of the thinking 'women are inferior to men', women were excluded in the early and middle developmental period of dragon dancing. Although the gender consciousness in Chinese society has been making continuous progress, in the early 1980s, women gradually participated in the activity of dragon dancing because of the lack of dragon dancers. "In ancient time, women were not allow to set into the ancestral hall according to the regulation of feudal moral rules" (Qianping, Jiang, 2015). Dragon dancing sustains the thinking of "man power is dominated", for example, women generally participated in work behind the scene such as the making, drawing, repairing and reserving of dragon. However the dragon dancing was mainly finished by the men, because dragon dancing was a kind of blessing ritual while women are born to be 'unlucky' in people's mind, thus forming a pattern of "foreground job for men" and "background job for women". Under such a pattern, men could participate in women's job, women, however could not participate in men's job (Qianping Jiang, 2015). In dragon dancing activity, women played the role of assisted performance, which could be seen as an epitome of social division of labor. With the gradual expansion of dragon dancing, there was a lack of young men who could act as the dragon dancers, therefore women had to participate in the training and performance of dragon dancing by wearing headbands and corpulent bloomers which could help them eliminate the characteristics of women (Chuanfei Tu, 2010), that means women were strictly limited in dragon dancing performance.

3. The training system for dragon dancing in contemporary China

Generally speaking, dragon dancing of women or men has been largely inherited and developed in the development of history, mainly because the cultural sectors in China protect dragon dancing as intangible cultural heritage and set up the well-established protection mechanism and stimulus mechanism. Currently, dragon dancing training can mainly be divided into 2 parts: One is the dragon dancing team established in universities (Xiwen Lou, 2011). Take my hometown as an example. This activity has been developed largely, since it entered into the institutions of higher learning of Hunan province in 1997. At present, among 28 institutions of higher learning, 15 have established their representative team of dragon dancing. It is a large proportion compared with other traditional cultural programs. The government sets up a series of awards, honors for the dragon dancing teams in university so as to stimulate their development. The dragon dancing sports teams in institutions of higher learning of Hunan province participated in large-scale games including world-level, state-level and province-level games.

According to Xiwen Lou (2011), generally speaking, men dragon dancing team and women dragon dancing team participate the training at the same time. A dragon dancing team includes around 20-30 members. The basic train-

ing conditions of representative teams can be seen as follows: 46.66% of universities have the training 2-3 times for each week, 33.33% of universities have the training 4-5 times for 1 week. Most of universities, after both establishing a new dragon team and having training lasting for 6-7 months can participate in the competition (Xi wen Lou, 2011). Hereafter, if there is no competition or performance, the training will be stopped; if there is, an intensive training before the competition is needed. Some universities carry on the training for dragon dancing during the holiday to prepare the competition and not to waste the learning time, although the period is comparatively short. Meanwhile, each university has their own short-term training teams in the needs of performance. Some of these teams select a batch of students to have the training lasting for 2-3 days (120 minutes for 1 day) just before the performance. 90% of universities possess 1-3 such teams (Ling Xue, 2009). According to such condition, it is one of the main goals for dragon dancing teams in universities to win the awards and honors issued by government or none-government cultural sectors through participating the competition and dragon dancing performance. On one hand, such reward mechanism could guarantee the inheritance and development of dragon dancing ritual, thus making students obtain the opportunity to do some sports, and making audience obtaining the aesthetic pleasure (Ling Xue, 2009). On the other, the booming of dragon dancing under reward mechanism is not a natural state. Dragon dancing will be stopped if there is no competition. According to such observation, training for dragon dancing in universities aims to cater for the government and the so-called cultural inheritance (Qiang Zhang, 2007) instead of meeting the needs of markets.

4. The current situation of dragon performers

The training mechanism for dragon dancing in universities is different from the training mechanism of ancestral line. This directly leads to the polarization of dragon performers. The first part is about the performers trained in the dragon dancing team in universities. But, few of them take dragon dancing-related jobs, and most of them participated in dragon dancing activities in the identity of public servant, businessman and worker (Ling Xue, 2009). Generally, since such activities are not reward-oriented activities, these people can't be regarded as those whose career is dragon dancing. Few of them would become the dragon dancing trainer and the spreader of dragon dancing knowledge. However, dragon dancing is a kind of sport that needs plenty of physical power, therefore it is not suitable for the child and the old and the young adults act as the majority of dragon dancers (Jianmin Kang, 2012). This is the requirement for the dancers' physical fitness. In addition, since the modern dragon dancing includes the competent of sports competition and a martial art. the beginner of dragon dancing could acquire basic dragon dancing performance through the training lasting for 6-7 months, and non-beginner also need to keep long-term training to participate in the dragon dancing activities. This is the basic requirement for the dragon dancing performer's skill. Under the limitation of skill level and insufficient training experiences, those who have the training for dragon dancing in universities are less likely to become professional dragon dancing performers. Xiwen Lou (2011) pointed out that according to an investigation on dragon dancing performers it became a focus that the professional dragon dancers are dominated by those who only finished their own middle-school education. That means those who have higher education are less likely to participate the dragon dancing. That also means those who have higher education are more likely to have higher social status, and are less likely to become the professional dragon performers. In addition, Xiwen Lou (2011) mentioned that such phenomenon is connected with the social mood for success and wealth in traditional thinking. Dragon dancer was considered as the sacrificial offering in Shang dynasty; was regarded as the performers which entertained people. These dancers have comparatively low social status. Thus, in ancient times, they were always considered as the humble actors to some degree. Although dancing ritual and dancers are needed in Chinese traditional festivals, dragon dance dancer is not a decent post with high payment.

The dragon dance dancer in the second part is trained by the training mechanism of dragon dancing in rural areas. Before China's reform and open-up, the dragon dancing ritual in a village was generally held by the senior with prestige. They selected the young, strong men with nimble movements for training. Those who were selected would be proud of themselves, since this was a kind of recognition of their status, identity and ability in their village (Ling Xue, 2009). Since the dancing ritual acts as an important blessing ritual in some regions such as Hunan province and Nanjing city, etc, the dragon performers could get some payment for their performance. Such income is a objective income now compared with such income before China's "reform and open-up". However, in modern society, on one hand, the feudalistic superstition is gradually broken up. Only few people still believe the dragon dancing ritual could bring people with protection and fortune. Thus people's entertainment lives are becoming more and

more colorful and the dragon dancing is not as important as it was before. On the other hand, the agricultural economy is replaced by market economy (Jianmin Kang, 2012). Dragon dancing is gradually out of people's memory owing to its not being able to bring people practical economic returns. Most of young adults in rural areas are employed in cities, therefore just few of them stay in rural areas, and the number of those who are willing to learn such a skill from the old people becomes smaller.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this article has explained the connection between the dragon dancing in ancient times and dragon dancing in modern society, their transformation and different characteristics. Meanwhile, this article stresses on the deep meaning of gender transformation in dragon dancing. Secondly, this article analyzes the dragon dancing system in contemporary China, including the differences between the training mechanism for dragon dancing in universities and the training mechanism for dragon dancing in the same clan of rural areas. In the end, this article discusses about the status and current situation of dragon performers in both mechanisms. Dragon dancing, as sacrificial ritual for rain in ancient times has evolved into a blessing ritual for holiday celebration and athletics sports item. It has been well inherited and developed, attracts the attention of Chinese officials and is under their protection. This is a rare phenomenon among Chinese other rituals. The transformation of dragon dancing formation, the dragon dancing gender records and represent the inheritance and evolution of Chinese social life and China's traditional rituals. Governments' official protection and support on dragon dancing transform the mode in ancient society under which dragon dancing spread from the lower level to the higher level to the mode in modern society under which dragon dancing spreads from the higher level to the lower level. The later mode could indirectly lead to the increase of dragon dancers in urban areas, but they are not professional dancers. On the contrary, the number of dragon dance dancers in rural areas is becoming smaller and smaller. Under the influence of modernized lifestyle and market economy, the significance of dragon dance becomes totally different from that before. This can be regarded as an epitome of the social life changes in one country.

References

- Bell, Catherine. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blackburn, Stuart H. (1998). "Looking Across the Contextual Divide: Studying Performance in South India." *South Asia Research* 18(1): 1-11.
- Chuanfei Tu. (2010). A Change of Dragon Dance in a village. *China Sport Science*. Vol. 30. No.7.
- Collins, Peter. (2005). 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a "Ritual"'. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20(3): 323-342.
- Douglas, Mary. (1978 [1970]). *Natural Symbols -Explorations in Cosmology*. London, Barrie and Jenkins Ltd.
- Jiang Qianping. (2015). Inheritance and change of folk dragon dance in rural area. *Journal of Longyan University*, Vol.33. No.4.
- Jianmin Kang. (2012). The Origin and the Development of Dragon dance in ancient times. *Lantai World*, 201203172.
- Jianwei Wang. (2000). The origin of dragon dance. *Sichuan Cultural Objects*, J722.2.
- Ling Xue. (2009). Traditional dragon dance and the modern dragon dance. *Shandong Sports Science & Technology*.
- Qiang Zhang. (2007). *Dragon dance in ancient China*. Historical Culture College, Xiangtan University, Xiangtan 411105, China.
- Xiwen Luo. (2011). Countermeasures on the Current Situation and Development of Dragon Sports Training and Competition in Universities of Hunan. P.E. School of Taizhou University, Taizhou, Zhejiang, 317000.