



An Evolution of Lion Dance in Hong Kong from the Perspective of Cultural Symbols

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Abstract

The lion dance is a popular folk custom or living culture in Hong Kong. It is often performed during major festivals and celebrations. From three dimensions, this article illustrates the change in Hong Kong people's attitude toward traditional Chinese culture reflected by the lion dance as a set of cultural symbols in the social and historical context of Hong Kong since the late Qing Dynasty. Specifically, in terms of cultural guarding, before the 1950s, the lion dance deeply reflected traditional Chinese culture, that is, warding off evil spirits, guarding, and auspiciousness; in terms of diaspora and subjectivity, from the 1950s to the 1970s, lion dancers strongly exhibited the ideology of resistance and self-awareness as the Chinese diaspora in Hong Kong; in terms of cultural hybridity and innovations, since the early 1980s, with the return of Hong Kong in 1997 and under the background of globalization and multi-culture, the lion dance is still a set of typical cultural symbols in Hong Kong, has been constantly innovated in terms of form, performance, communication, and the rest, and integrated into the global lion dance cultural community.

Keywords: lion dance, cultural guarding, diaspora, cultural hybridity, cultural innovations

1. Introduction

The lion dance is one of the traditional folk sports in China, with a long history and profound cultural implicature. Nowadays lion dance is still a necessary program among the ethnic Chinese all over the world on such special days as the Chinese Spring Festival and various opening ceremonies.

Lions belong to a large powerful animal of the cat family introduced into China from West Asia via the Silk Road (Huang, 1936). In ancient times, what lions looked like was based on the gossip the ordinary people heard, except the emperors and families of power and influence had a chance to see these exotic beasts. In addition, due to no struggle for survival between ancient Chinese and lions, a good imagination about lions became popular among the people. In comparison with lions, tigers as a native often had conflicts with the Chinese people although they are also large powerful animals, thus, the painful experiences such as injuries even death haunted the people. In traditional Chinese culture, tigers have either a good image or a bad image, but they are implied more derogatorily, for instance, to be nicknamed "the strong bullying the weak", to be used to criticize the cruel government, "Tyranny is fiercer than a tiger" (see *The Snake Catcher* by Zongyuan Liu, a poet in the Tang Dynasty), the four-Chinese-Character idiom "Fang Hu Gui Shan", which means letting the tiger return to the mountain, i.e. to cause calamity for the future. By contrast, ancient Chinese have shaped a positive or good image of a lion.

After textual research, it is found that in the current academic circle, the origin of the lion dance often comes in various versions. For example, Xue and Wang (2021) argue that:

1) The lion dance was inspired by the dance of lion tamers from the Western Regions in the Han Dynasty. In general, a few lions maybe still alive after a long and arduous journey, and real lions only performed at the royal palace, so folk artists performed lion dances for the ordinary people by employing a papier-mâché lion.

2) In the Wei Kingdom of the Three Kingdoms Period, the Buddha parade was led by the masked people in hides acting as lions on April 4 day of the Chinese lunar calendar, the Manjushri's birthday.

3) The prototype of the lion dance was developed in the Northern Wei Dynasty. The Notes of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang by Yang Xuanzhi talked about “lions lead the way to ward off the evil force” to describe the Buddha parade in Changqiu Temple in Luoyang.

4) Lion dance was closely related to a mythical beast “Nian”, who helped people out of plague; or to Monster “Nian”, who hurt ordinary people and destroyed crops.

To sum up, on the one hand, the lion dance emerged and developed with the introduction of Buddhism into ancient China, because of the lion as Manjushri’s mount; on the other hand, it dated back to the magic rites or myths.

Since its formation, the lion dance was widely spread across ancient China. Furthermore, due to a big difference between the south of China and the north of China in terms of culture, two styles of lion dance were gradually established with their characteristics, i.e., southern-style lion dance and northern-style lion dance. And lion dance in Hong Kong belongs to the southern style.

2. Literature Review

Academic research on the Chinese lion dance dated back to the first half of the 20th century, and the early scholars counted the Chinese lion dance as a living culture and carried on relevant research from the point of view of the “cultural identity” of the Chinese nation (Jian, 2021). Research perspectives have varied greatly along with time vicissitude. The inheritance and modern development of the lion dance as a folk sport have been explored by different scholars. For instance, Q. Lei and J. Lei (2017) analyzed the internal and external factors of the lion dance’s development in China, including its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, found the existing problems, and put forward the countermeasures for its sustainable development strategy in an attempt to solve them; from the perspective of regional culture, i.e. Lingnan culture (referring to the culture of Guangdong and Guangxi) and Qilu culture (referring to the culture of Shandong), Zheng & Zhang, et al. (2020) made an analysis and comparison of the content and characteristics of the lion dance as a folk sport. Fan and Yuan (2021), on the existing problems of the intangible cultural heritage of lion dance in China, such as lack of protection awareness and young inheritors, some countermeasures are put forward, including developing the platform and brand, expanding financing channels, continuously cultivating inheritors, adapting to the development of sports industry and tourism. In addition, relevant studies from the angle of sociology, communication, and dance have also been carried out, and the most commonly-used approach is to combine field investigation with the folk literature method. For instance, Dong and Zhu (2020) seek to construct the principles of Chinese ethnic aesthetic culture through analyzing local performance techniques and body language of the dance drama “Lion Awakening”.

Furthermore, studies concerning lion dance from the perspective of culture are particularly flourishing, and scholars have discussed lion dance at all levels of culture. Avaunt (2021), from the feminine point of view, has challenged stereotypes of traditional Asian women through interviewing female lion players in Boston’s Chinatown in the U.S.A. and has argued the physical and mental functions of lion dancing for a rebuilding of the body against racialized and sexualized notions of bodily permeability. Ying and Chiat (2016) have looked into the concept of 1 Malaysia from the angle of ethnic identity and cultural hybridity through analyzing the evolution (survival and change) of the diasporic Chinese lion dance in Malaysia, involving changes in the musical instruments, melody, and choreography. Zhang (2021) attempts to construct ethical norms for the development of the ASEAN dragon and lion dance to realize the goal of establishing an ASEAN cultural community (Zhang, 2021). Xue and Wang (2021) have found the cultural characteristics of Guangxi Malays, i.e. balanced co-existence between Chinese ethnic culture and other ethnic cultures of Malaysia, and their cultural identity, through surveying the Lion Dance Troupe of Selangor Kuala Lumpur Guangxi Association and their rituals, analyzing the political, religious and economic impacts from the anthropological perspective (Xue & Wang, 2021).

To conclude, the previous studies of lion dance have been carried out from various aspects of culture, but scholars seldom systematically look into the evolution of its cultural symbols and explore the social and historical reasons behind it, although they have deemed “lion awakening” as a cultural symbol. Hong Kong, as a commercial port, gradually became a British colony after the First Opium War (1840-1842). After the Second World War, Hong Kong started accelerating its economy and was named one of the “Four Asian Tigers” as the financial, service, and shipping center in Asia. From 1842 to 1997, Hong Kong was playing a unique role in modern Chinese history. This article, therefore, will focus on the lion dance in Hong Kong, and explore the evolution from the perspective of cultural symbols.

3. An Evolution of Lion Dance in Hong Kong

3.1 Guarding Chinese Traditional Culture

In comparison with a relatively realistic image of the northern-style lion, the southern-style lion in China has a delicate animated image with a horn on its head. The northern-style lion dance in China shows a more fiercely lion and has integrated the movements of acrobatics and martial arts. Comparatively speaking, southern-style lion dance is characterized by storytelling and symbolic meanings. According to the *Collection of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance (Guangdong Volume)* (1996), during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the southern-style lion dance particularly prevailed in Foshan Town as one of four famous towns in ancient China. During the performance of the southern-style lion dance, Caiqing is the most important and interesting part. Lion dancers perform a series of moves to fetch bunches of lucky greens hung above. All the greens have auspicious meanings when calling their name in Cantonese. Lettuce, for example, represents “fortune”, celery, “diligence” and Chinese spring onions “intelligence”. As the performance draws to a close, lion dancers will receive “lai see” packets, the red envelopes containing money - commonly exchanged for bringing good luck and all the good things the greens symbolize.

The lion dance inherited and guarded the traditional Chinese culture. As above mentioned, the lion dance originated from magic rites or myths, the performers act like a lion by imitating such actions as jumping, scratching, and sniffing. In ancient China, through lion dance dancing, the performers were endowed with the magic or power and were involved in mythical imagination, which implies an action of a belief that ill-willed spirits will be exorcised, an abundant harvest of all crops will arrive in the next year and people will have good luck. It is through such symbolic actions that the lion dancers express their feelings and emotions. According to Cassirer’s view, “without symbolism the life of man would be like that of the prisoners in the cave of Plato’s famous simile, man’s life would be confined within the limits of his biological needs and his practical interests; it makes man find an access to the “ideal world” which is opened to him from different sides” (Cassirer, 1944, p. 62). The prototype of the lion dance was deeply rooted in the agricultural civilization of ancient China, mirroring the feudal society where the emperor dreamed that a powerful lion can make the dream of his empire flourishing and invigorating come true. As Barthes notes, “If one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society—in short, to pass from semiology to ideology” (Barthes, 1973, p. 138). All cultural symbols as a whole are integrated into the lion dance and the performers themselves. In other words, lion dancing, in some sense, is a folk art image full of the significance of symbol value.

During the late Qing Dynasty, people from all corners of the country gathered in Guangdong in order to make a living. Far away from their hometown, they had to strive for wider living space and inevitably had conflicts with each other. Resorting to violence became one of the most important ways to “solve problems”, so the martial spirit was encouraged here. Naturally, only folk performances following martial spirit can survive and become popular, so did the southern-style lion dance. On the other hand, the Chinese nation underwent a dramatic transformation at that time, but they still resisted bravely while persistently seeking a way to great rejuvenation. And the Chinese nation was counted as a sleeping lion. These codes and signs are not universally given but are historically and socially specific to the particular interests and purposes which lie behind them (Strinati, 2005, p.100). That means that symbols could be changed if the surroundings required it. The lion dance as a set of cultural symbols, therefore, had another meaning, attempting to shape a positive image that the Chinese were vigorously striving forward instead of a negative image that the Chinese looked like the sick and weak man. Here cultural meanings of lion dance referred not only to such traditional meanings as guarding, exorcism, and auspiciousness but also to national salvation because no signs or symbols can be divorced from the social conditions where they are to be found. In the national crisis, the Chinese national identity was constructed and the lion dance was consequentially deemed as a unique medium of the spirit of those days. Undoubtedly, Wong Fei-hung is a witness to this historical period. Wong Fei-hung himself is an embodiment of or a cultural symbol of the Chinese national spirit. In those days, lion dancing was considered as a necessary stunt for each Martial club in Guangdong. As the Top 1 lion dancer in Guangdong, Wong Fei-hung made great contributions to the development of southern-style lion dance. Facing with gradual loss of independence and autonomy, the Chinese people fought back. It was in the historical context that Wong Fei-hung successfully combined Kongfu with the southern-style lion dance (Zhang, 2013). Here lion dancing was to build up the Chinese people’s bodies from the outside and was to reflect the Chinese people’s determination to transform the tragic reality from the inside. It can, therefore, be said that lion dance is not only a folk sport but also a symbol of arousing the Chinese national consciousness. As seen in the series of Wong Fei-hung directed by Hark Tsui, as a master of Nan Quan (southern-style fist), Wong Fei-hung was concerned about his country, the Chinese people, and the national future, and was shaped into a national hero, and his lion dancing was the high point of movies.

In brief, from its opening as a commercial port in 1841 to around the year of victory of China’s Resistance War against Japanese Aggression, Hong Kong was gradually developed into a crowded wharf where people generally worked as passers-by from a small fishing village, a barbaric area. At that time, Canton, Hong Kong, and Macao were blended into a

large region. Hong Kong people shared the same cultural identity with Canton, the old name of Guangzhou as the provincial capital. Since Hong Kong was strongly affiliated with Guangdong, there was no difference between the lion dance in Hong Kong and in Guangdong. During this period, the lion dance in Hong Kong, to some extent, was still an integral part of southern-style lion dance, advancing with the times while ensuring traditional cultural inheritance.

3.2 Diaspora & Subjectivity

As of the 1950s, a large number of Chinese people from all over the country flooded in Hong Kong to take refuge. After that, the Chinese people settling down in Hong Kong and their descendants have survived ups and downs. As the first generation of Chinese immigrants spoke different dialects and had different folk cultures, what the concept of “hometown” or “cultural root” meant was quite peculiar for them. Before the return of Hong Kong to the motherland, besides the Chinese, there were the British governing Hong Kong, the Indians from the former British colonies, the Pakistanis and the Ceylonese (now Sri Lanka), and those people from Europe, the U.S.A., Japan and the Singapore doing business in Hong Kong; meanwhile, the Chinese people accounted for a large proportion of Hong Kong’s population, but their influence was far less than the foreign personnel’s (Zhou, 2019, Chapter 1). In light of the diaspora which is the most distinctive feature of Hong Kong culture, the first generation of Chinese immigrants far from their hometown urgently sought their roots, things relating to their ancestors, and attempted to find a sense of belonging. Hence, they recollected and repeated their past experiences, which became a sort of symbolic memory. However, as imagination is an essential factor of true recollection, the meaning of those ancient symbols, in fact, is reconstructed on the ground of Hong Kong.

Since ancient times, lion dancing is still one of the most popular, typical, and traditional Chinese folk performances, lion dance as a set of cultural symbols necessarily becomes one of the most important identity symbols of the Chinese nation in Hong Kong. At that time, the first generation of Chinese immigrants brought their common cultural memory back and found themselves through performing and watching lion dance. As most Chinese immigrants came from Guangdong, they naturally identify the Cantonese culture as their cultural root. In the old days, in the 60s or 70s, there were street gangs and ordinary Hong Kong often suffered from bullying, so they felt compelled to learn Chinese martial arts. Because lion dancing itself integrates lots of martial arts, many lion dance troupes were established and various competitions were held among different martial clubs. Meanwhile, fierce competition occurred between two styles of lion dance in Hong Kong, but the southern-style lion dance has prevailed. Lion dancers in Hong Kong, in some sense, were imbued with “an ideology of rebellion” during this period.

In the process of seeking the cultural root, the first generation of Chinese immigrants and their descendants developed their self-consciousness or subjectivity and changed their identity from refugees to Hong Kong citizens and Chinese citizens step by step (Zhou, 2019, Chapter 1). Hong Kong people have created their own local culture, namely, unique popular culture, while reinterpreting Chinese cultural staples, which were greatly influenced by the diaspora and post-colonialism. It can be said that Hong Kong is keeping its Chinese core alive, demonstrating Chinese cultural traditions with fashion and elegance.

As we know, a genuine cultural symbol is not inflexible, uniform but variable and mobile. As a classic cultural symbol, the lion dance in Hong Kong has developed its unique style. On the one hand, the lion dance firmly sticks to symbolic meanings of traditional Chinese culture, for instance, warding off ill-willed spirits, good luck, and good fortune; on the other hand, the lion dance in Hong Kong creates a more carnival-like atmosphere, so entertaining feature and commercial values are highlighted, which very well reflects Hong Kong’s unique popular culture. As dancer-choreographer Daniel Yeung explained in *Chinadaily.com.cn* dated October 19, 2018 (Hong Kong Edition), “The lion dance symbolizes local cultural heritage for me. It is timeless: No matter how much Hong Kong society has changed, the dance is always there to represent us.

3.3 Cultural Hybridity & Cultural Innovations

As Hong Kong is characterized by mass immigration and interracial communications, cultural hybridity becomes salient in Hong Kong. In the 21st century, Hong Kong people have changed their criteria of value judgment from hierarchy in social status in the past to freedom and equality at present (Zhou, 2019, Preface). Hong Kong gradually formed its own unique local culture, mixing with different cultures from different regions and countries. And lion dance witnesses the historical vicissitude of Hong Kong and perfectly demonstrates its hybridity--unique popular culture.

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity (Bhabha, 1994, p. 55). As above mentioned, lions are non-indigenous species and were introduced in ancient China via Silk Road, and most of the

ancient Chinese people never saw them with their own eyes but relied on hearsay. After knowing a little bit about lions as a symbol of heterogeneous culture, ancient Chinese people poured their own imagination into the symbol of lions, reconstructed the image of lions, created such Chinese folk tales as a mythical beast or Monster “Nian”, and gradually developed different styles of lion dances in the light of regional cultural characteristics. It can be said, therefore, that the origin of lion dance presented the cultural hybridity from the outset. Moreover, it is inadvisable to describe lion dance as the symbol of pure Chinese culture, although people all over the world have reached a consensus on lion dance as a Chinese tradition.

In Hong Kong, lion dance is closely associated with Hong Kong people’s everyday life, integrating different cultural factors while inheriting traditional Chinese culture. One of the most common ways to keep this cultural symbol alive is to participate in the lion dance competitions throughout the world, especially in Southeast Asian countries, as an international cultural exchange. In a lion dance competition, choreography, acrobatics, dangerous stunts, and intense rhythmic accompaniment become the elements of judging (Ying & Chiat, 2016). In this way, lion dance troupes from Hong Kong have learned from other troupes from other regions and countries and bring forth new ideas in all aspects of lion dance, keeping pace with the times. For instance, lion practitioners were all male, because, traditionally, on the one hand, the lion dance demonstrated masculinity, on the other hand, deeply influenced by traditional Chinese ethics and the patriarchal clan system, women had no chance to learn lion dance in ancient times. With the improvement of social status and self-awareness, more and more women join lion dance troupes. In terms of management of the lion dance troupe, modern enterprise management system and modern marketing have been introduced, which is a big leap for any traditional lion dance troupe. According to Chinanews.com.cn dated February 13, 2016, Xiuming Ouyang first set out to change the image of the lion dance troupe by means of staff regulations and rules because martial clubs in Hong Kong were closely related to the gangsterdom before the 1970s, then have studied the programs of business administration. She said, “In the past, the lion troupes thought everything would be all right if lion dancers performed, but now customers pay more attention to casting and service.” In addition, lion practitioners constantly explore a way to innovate lion dance. At the ninth edition of the New Vision Arts Festival (NVAF) on Chinadaily.com.cn dated October 19, 2018 (Hong Kong Edition), choreographer and artistic director Daniel Yeung told a story of a mythical figure from the Three Kingdoms (220-280 B.C.) period named Guan Yu’s Ride of 1,000 Miles, by re-working traditional lion dances and merging with Cantonese kung fu, visual and audio creations. He said, “The stories of Guan Yu led to the poetry in the performance - from the purely solid physical works of dance and martial arts to the creative visual and audio multimedia theater.” It was reported on Chinanews.com.cn (dated February 19, 2022) that fluorescent fabrics were made into lion costumes, the lion dance “handwork” was developed, and even “hip hop” music and dance were applied to give a new interpretation of lion dance. In the era of information, the transmission mode of lion dance in Hong Kong as a set of cultural symbols is no longer confined to live performance, and new media has become an indispensable mode. Besides, new teaching methods are also adopted to attract young people to learn lion dancing.

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, lion dance is still one of the most popular, characteristic, and traditional performances in Hong Kong. It has been an integral part of Hong Kong’s complicated history, witnessing its adversities and also its glories. On the one hand, as a set of cultural symbols, the lion dance has no substantial being. Still, it perfectly displays its functional value, namely, representing different meanings at different times, for instance, exorcism, driving out evil spirits, auspiciousness, good fortune, protecting against harmful beings, etc. Nevertheless, with the development of lion dance in Hong Kong, on the other hand, it has played double roles, namely, keeping traditional Chinese culture and developing with the times, in order that young people are willing to inherit this cultural tradition and continuously carry it forward.

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