Negotiating Cultural Identity: Fusion and Innovation in the Luolong Lion Dance of the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Road

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines the Luolong Lion Dance, a culturally hybrid folk performance that originated along the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Road. The study aims to explore how the Han Chinese lion dance evolved through interaction with Tibetan religious, aesthetic, and musical traditions. Data collection was conducted through literature review, field observation, and interviews with local performers. Using the theory of cultural integration, the study found that the dance developed through three stages: contact, selection, and integration. The lion dance was initially brought to the Tibetan region through trade and migration. It was then selectively adapted to include rhythmic patterns from Tibetan pot dance and costume elements reflecting local beliefs. Eventually, a fully integrated form emerged, combining Han lion dance structure with Tibetan symbolic and stylistic features.

The research reveals that the Luolong Lion Dance is not a simple borrowing but a new cultural creation reflecting the dynamic coexistence of ethnic traditions. This offers new insights into how folk arts evolve as tools of identity negotiation and cultural sustainability. The findings contribute to performance studies and heritage preservation, and they highlight the potential of traditional dance to promote social cohesion in multiethnic communities. While statistical data was not the focus due to the qualitative nature of the research, the study emphasizes the frequency and consistency of cultural elements shared across communities. This work provides valuable knowledge for scholars, cultural practitioners, and policymakers interested in intercultural understanding and community-based cultural preservation.

Keywords: Sichuan-Tibet tea horse road, Cultural integration, Han-Tibetan fusion dance, Luolong lion dance

Introduction

The Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Trail is located in the southwestern interior of China, stretching from Ya'an in Sichuan Province in the east to Shigatse in Tibet in the west. It serves as a vital transportation artery connecting the inland regions with the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, as well as an economic corridor and cultural corridor developed through the tea-horse trade. This route originated during the Tang Dynasty and flourished during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. It not only witnessed the prosperous history of the thousand-year-old tea-horse trade but also played a pivotal role as a bridge for cultural exchange and integration between Han and Tibetan cultures during the prolonged process of ethnic interaction.

This route spans regions inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, giving rise to diverse forms of dance culture and forming a uniquely regional and ethnic dance landscape in the Sichuan-Tibet region. Due to differences in geographical environment, economic structure, and religious beliefs, Han and Tibetan folk dances exhibit significant diversity and uniqueness in terms of movement style, content expression, and rhythmic structure. However, the existence of the Tea-Horse Ancient Road facilitated frequent transportation and trade along its route. Merchants, caravans, and porters, through their long-distance migrations and interactions, not only facilitated the circulation of goods but also served as important mediators for cultural transmission and exchange. It was precisely through this cross-ethnic, multi-cultural interaction and exchange that Tibetan dances, as well as the interaction between Tibetan and Han dances, underwent continuous mutual borrowing and integration. Ultimately, this gave rise to the Luolong Lion Dance in the Luolong region, a dance form that distinctly embodies the fusion of Han and Tibetan cultures.

Currently, academic research on the dance culture of the Tea Horse Road primarily focuses on specific folk dance forms and their historical transmission in a particular region, or comparative analyses of two similar dance forms, with limited systematic study of the fusion of folk dances among multiple ethnic groups along the route. As an important economic and cultural corridor connecting Sichuan and Tibet, the dance cultural interactions and integration formed through the Tea Horse Road in promoting ethnic exchanges, interactions, and integration have not yet received sufficient attention from the academic community. Taking the Luolong Lion Dance as an example, relevant records can only be found in the Luolong County Annals, and there is still a lack of in-depth discussion on its dance form, historical origins, Han-Tibetan cultural fusion characteristics, and its fusion mechanism.

To fill this research gap, this paper takes the Luolong Lion Dance as its research object and, based on multiple field surveys, uses the three-stage model of ‘contact-selection-integration’ proposed by Yun Rong in his theory of cultural integration to systematically analyse the process of Han and Tibetan fusion in the context of the Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road. The research focuses on: how the Luolong Lion Dance achieved contact with heterogeneous cultures through the Tea-Horse Ancient Road; the choices made in terms of dance movements, musical styles, performance venues, and costumes and props during the contact process; and how these elements were reorganised and integrated during the fusion stage to ultimately form a dance form with regional and multi-ethnic characteristics.

This study not only broadens the research perspective on the cultural integration of dance in the Sichuan and Tibet sections of the Tea Horse Road, but also fills the gap in academic research on the Luolong Lion Dance, providing a theoretical basis and empirical reference for future in-depth exploration of the mechanisms of cultural exchange and integration between Han and Tibetan dance.



Figure 1 Location of Luolong Lion Dance on the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Road (Source**:** Researcher)

Objectives

To study the process of fusion in the Han-Tibetan fusion dance Luolong Lion Dance.

Literature review

Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road

The Sichuan- Tibet Tea- Horse Ancient Trail was an important trade and cultural corridor in southwestern China, originating in the Tang and Song dynasties and flourishing during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its route stretched from Ya'an in Sichuan Province to Shigatse in Tibet, serving as a vital link between Han Chinese regions and Tibetan areas. This ancient route not only served as a trade route for tea and horses but also became an important vehicle for cultural exchange, interaction, and integration between Han and Tibetan cultures over the long course of history (Lu, 2021). The mutually dependent relationship formed by the tea- horse trade led to frequent exchanges of lifestyles, religious beliefs, and artistic forms among different ethnic groups. The commercialisation of towns along the route and the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups further promoted the reconstruction and sharing of cultural identity (Liu, 2021).

Within the tea- horse trade system, tea became an essential commodity in Tibetan society, while the fine horses of the Tibetan regions were highly sought after in inland areas. This mutually beneficial relationship not only maintained economic ties but also facilitated the interweaving of cultural forms. For example, the route from Ya'an to Kangding was the core pathway for tea entering Tibet. Porters, as the primary transport labour force, spread the language, customs, and beliefs of inland regions while traversing mountains and valleys. Potang, as a hub along the route, not only served commercial functions but also became an important venue for multi- ethnic exchange, feasting, and song and dance. Additionally, the integration of tea culture with Tibetan Buddhism gave rise to unique temple tea- drinking rituals, blending Han tea etiquette with Tibetan religious practices and providing conditions for the artistic expression of faith and daily life (Lu, 2021).



Figure 2 Route Map of the Ancient Tea and Horse Road in Sichuan and Tibet Location: Ya'an Museum (Source**:** Researcher)

Cultural Integration

The theory of cultural integration was not first proposed by a single scholar; rather, research findings from multiple disciplines have contributed to the development of the theory. From Turgon's idea of social integration to Gordon's stage theory of cultural integration to Bass's theory of boundary adjustment, cultural integration has gradually evolved into a multidimensional theoretical framework that has been widely used to explain the phenomenon of cultural intermingling in the context of migration, cross-cultural exchange and globalisation. In his classic work, The Theory of the division of labour in society (Durkheim, 1893), Turgot explored how societies achieve integration through division of labour and cooperation. He argued that 'mechanical solidarity is the earliest state of union experienced by human society', and although Turgot focused more on social wholeness, this idea provided the theoretical basis for later studies of cultural integration. Milton Gordon, in his book Assimilation in American Life (Gordon,1964), systematically elaborated the process of assimilation and integration of immigrant cultures, and put forward the idea of 'cultural integration' as the basis for the study of cultural assimilation. In Assimilation in American Life (Gordon,1964), he systematically described the process of assimilation and integration of immigrant cultures and proposed 'cultural integration' as an important stage of cultural assimilation. He defined cultural integration as the process of immigrant groups gradually adapting to the mainstream culture through language, values and social behaviour. Gordon points out that Cultural Integration is not a unidirectional cultural absorption, but a multi-level dynamic process that includes the interaction of explicit and implicit cultures (Gordon, 1964, p.71). In his classic work Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (Barth,1969), Fredrik Barth proposed the Cultural Boundary Theory, which delves into the dynamic process of cultural integration. He stressed that cultural integration is not a one-way cultural absorption or assimilation, but a process of adjusting and redefining cultural boundaries through dialogue and negotiation among different cultural groups (Barth, 1969, p.9). Eric Jones in Cultural Convergence - A Critique of Culture Based on History and Economics analyses the relationship between the interaction between culture and economy and argues that 'culture is both fluid and sticky. When different markets begin to compete, the stickiness of culture ceases and cultures eventually converge (Jones, 2019, 14).'

The Encyclopedia of Modern Leadership - Technology and Culture defines cultural integration as a form of cultural adjustment. According to the Encyclopedia of Modern Leadership, cultural fusion is defined as a form of cultural adjustment, a phenomenon in which two separate cultural systems, through prolonged contact, learn from and influence each other to the point where they become close to each other (it is often difficult to reach a point of complete homogeneity). Generally, fusion occurs when two related cultures are evenly matched. As a result of this fusion, a third cultural system may emerge, and the two original cultural systems may disappear or become subcultures within the new cultural system. If one of the two related cultures is the dominant culture, another form of cultural adjustment may occur (Liu et al., 2008, 234).

Although the aforementioned theories offer valuable perspectives on cultural integration from different angles, they still have certain limitations when explaining cultural practices in the multi-ethnic coexistence context of the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Road. Gordon's ‘immigrant-mainstream’ model is more suitable for unidirectional absorption mechanisms and struggles to fully reveal the interactive logic of ‘multilateral equality and multicultural coexistence’ in the Sichuan-Tibet region; Bass's boundary negotiation theory, though closer to reality, still requires further refinement of its ‘boundary reconstruction’ mechanism in specific dance practices; Jones's ‘cultural de-viscosity’ logic emphasises cultural fluidity in economic interactions, though it is insightful, it is difficult to fully apply it to the highly stable religious and ritualistic cultural environment of the Tibetan region. Therefore, its applicability also requires adjustment and reconstruction based on local realities.

The cultural integration along the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Trail is not a simple ‘dominant-subordinate’ structure, but rather encompasses multiple mechanisms such as trade migration, ethnic cohabitation, religious propagation, and shared rituals. In this context, a single assimilation model cannot accurately explain the interactive mechanisms of dance culture. In contrast, the three-stage model of ‘contact-selection-integration’ better captures the phased characteristics and active selection processes in the integration of Sichuan-Tibet dance. This model emphasises that culture undergoes selection and reconstruction after contact, ultimately forming a unique integrated culture. This provides a clear theoretical framework for analysing the process of blending Han and Tibetan elements in the Luolong Lion Dance.

To sum up, cultural integration refers to the process by which a national culture, based on its traditional culture, absorbs and digests foreign cultures as needed in the course of cultural exchanges to promote its own development. The process of cultural integration is divided into three stages: contact, impact, and screening and integration. The integration of dance culture on the Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road can be analysed according to this framework, in the process of interaction, exchange and integration between Han Chinese and Tibetans through the Tea Horse Road, through the contact of different cultures, the impact with their own cultures, and then screened according to their own needs, and finally the formation of cultural integration. For example, circulated in Sichuan and Tibet Tea Horse Road, an important post, Tibet Chamdo Luolong Lion Dance, through the Tea Horse Road so that Luolong County and the Lion Dance contact, and because the Lion Dance in the Han Chinese symbol of good luck, so the local residents are very fond of the Lion Dance, the Tibetan people in the acceptance of the Lion Dance at the same time chose to join the characteristics of some of the local folk dances that are more prevalent, such as the pace of the Pot Zhuang Dance, etc., and finally integrated to form a We now see the Luolong Lion Dance.

Luolong Lion Dance

The average altitude of Luolong County, Chamdo City, Tibet is about 3,700 metres above sea level, which used to be an important post on the Tea and Horse Road, and also an important channel for Sino-Tibetan exchanges. In Shodu Town of Luolong County, the local people have incorporated elements of Tibetan folk dances, such as the Reba Dance and the Pot Zhuang Dance, into the Lion Dance that was introduced to the area in the early years, resulting in a form of performance with both Chinese and Tibetan characteristics - the Luolong Lion Dance (DangZen, 2014).

The Luolong Lion Dance was passed down from the Qing officials and soldiers stationed in Tibet and merchants in the middle and late Qing Dynasty and gradually became popular. In the performance and inheritance of the dance, the elements of the local culture were constantly drawn from, thus forming the perfect combination of the present lion dance and the local Luolong Pot Dance. It is the crystallisation of the collision of Tibetan and Chinese national cultures, representing the unshakable friendship between the nationalities and reflecting the interaction, exchange and fusion of Tibetan and Chinese national cultures. The lion, as a representative of auspicious beasts, symbolises good luck and good fortune, and the Shuodu Lion Dance sends the people's hope for a good harvest and peace in the world.



Figure 3 Lion head prop (Source**:** Researcher)

In summary, current research on the dance culture of the Tea Horse Road has primarily focused on the historical evolution or comparative analysis of individual dance forms, with limited systematic exploration of the underlying mechanisms of cultural integration from a theoretical perspective. Particularly in the complex, intertwined context of ‘multiple ethnic groups multiple cultures multiple functions,’ there remains a gap in the dynamic tracking of the evolutionary pathways of artistic forms. In light of this, this paper expands upon existing research: on the one hand, it draws on Gordon's structural perspective on cultural integration to analyse the logic of contact and penetration between Han and Tibetan dance cultures; on the other hand, it responds to and develops Bas's theoretical framework on the negotiation and dynamic reconstruction of cultural boundaries; simultaneously, it critically incorporates Jones's logic that ‘economic exchange promotes cultural integration,’ emphasising the need to adjust this framework in the context of Tibet, where religion and ritual play a strong role. Based on this, this paper focuses on the field of dance practice, employing a three-stage model of ‘contact-selection-integration’ to deeply analyse how the Luolong Lion Dance achieves deep integration of Han and Tibetan cultures at the levels of historical inheritance, geographical space, and bodily practice.

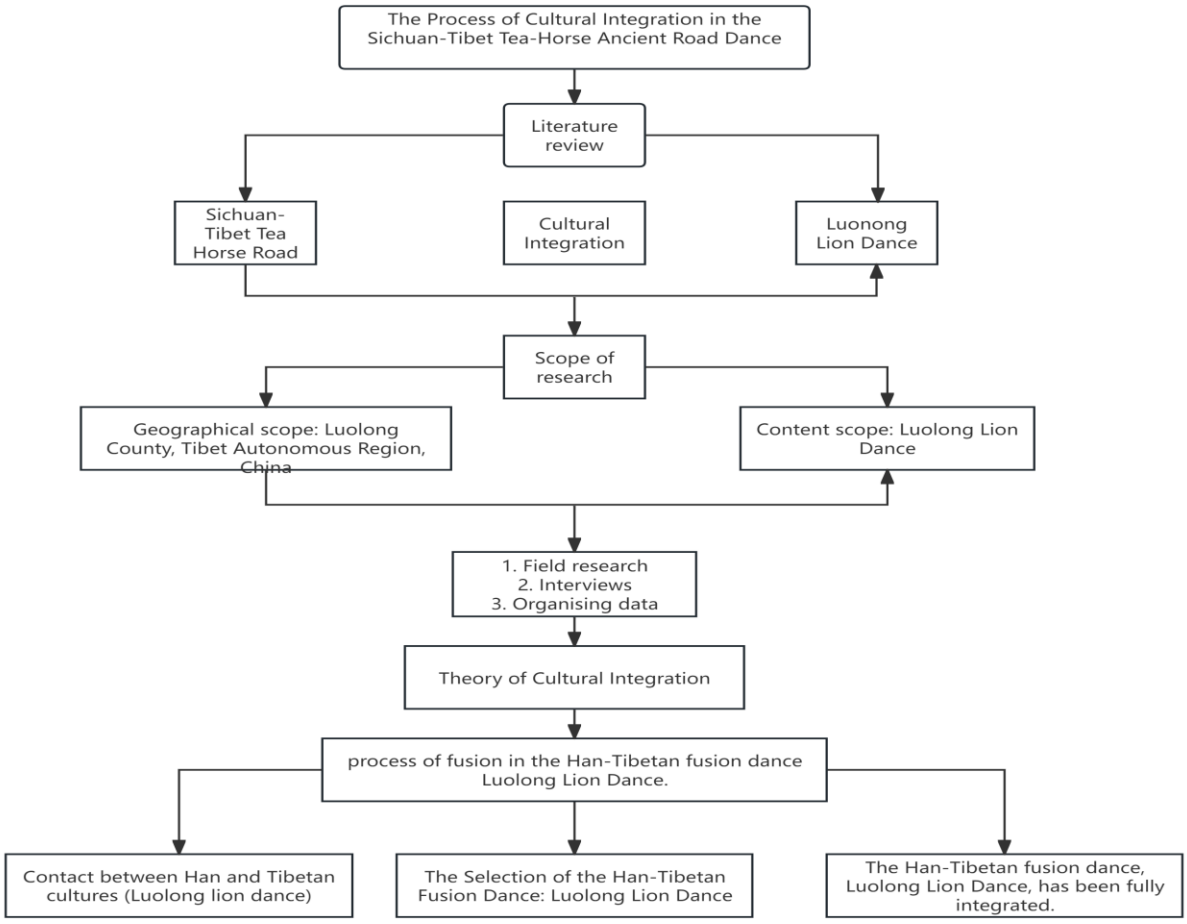


Figure 4 Conceptual Framework (Source**:** Researcher)

Methodology

This research is a qualitative research project focusing on the Han-Tibetan fusion dance known as the Luolong Lion Dance, which originated along the ancient Tea- Horse Road connecting Sichuan and Tibet. Data was collected through methods such as literature review, field research, interviews, and observation to analyse the Han- Tibetan fusion dance— the Luolong Lion Dance. To achieve the research objectives, this thesis combines literature review with field research, conducts interviews with practitioners of the Luolong Lion Dance, and closely observes the performance forms of the Luolong Lion Dance to address the issues raised in This research and achieve its research objectives.

Criteria for selecting interviewees for the Luolong Lion Dance:

1. Recognised by the community, dance organisations or relevant government agencies (such as the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Centre).

2. Influential locally or more widely, and playing a positive role in the transmission of the dance.

3. Able to fully reproduce the style, structure and performance methods of the dance.

4. Proficient in the core techniques of the dance.

Table 1 Basic Information on the Bearers of the Luolong Lion Dance

Name	Basic Information	Photo
Dengba Ani	Fifth-generation inheritor of the Luolong Lion Dance, male, born in 1955, began learning the lion dance from his father at the age of 13, member of the village art troupe, teaches the Luolong Lion Dance locally, and has trained the sixth generation of inheritors.	

The interview was conducted on July 3, 2024, at Luolong County Square, with the primary interviewee being Dengba Ani, the fifth-generation inheritor of the Luolong Lion Dance. Additional informal conversations were held with three of his apprentices and two audience members. The formal interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, was fully recorded, and later transcribed. The content covered Dengba Ani's experience of becoming an inheritor, the historical origin and cultural background of the dance, the Han-Tibetan cultural elements reflected in the performance, movement routines, costumes and props, typical performance sequences, and the role and significance of the dance in local community life.

Table 2 Observation Table of the Llolong Lion Dance

Observation content	Luolong Lion Dance Performance Process, Performance Space, Performance Form, Costumes, Props	Observation period	3 July 2024
Observation subject	Lolong Lion Dance inheritor	Observer	Wen Qian
Observation theme	The ecological and cultural environment and performance style of the Luolong Lion Dance	Observation location	Luolong County Square
Observation content record	The performance takes place during the summer festival at Luolong County Square, where the open space is naturally surrounded by spectators, creating an open-air performance structure with the centre as the stage. The performance process of Luolong Lion Dance is unique and full of ritualistic significance. It typically begins with the lively sounds of gongs and drums—the lion dance team, dressed in elaborate traditional costumes, enters the venue to the rhythm of vigorous drumbeats and the clanging of cymbals, with the lion raising its head and swaying its tail, instantly igniting the atmosphere on-site; The core performance phase follows, where dancers showcase the lion's ferocity and agility through high-difficulty moves like leaps, rolls, and flips, interspersed with traditional segments like ball-playing, 'plucking the green,' and climbing heights for blessings. During weddings or other joyous occasions, the lion may perform actions like licking the bride and groom's clothing or circling the wedding banquet tables to convey blessings for early offspring and household prosperity; At the climax of the performance, the lion dance team often interacts with the audience, such as guiding children to touch the lion's head for blessings or leading everyone in chanting auspicious slogans, pushing the festive atmosphere to its peak; Finally, amid the cheers of the crowd, the lion concludes the performance with a 'three bows and nine kowtows' farewell ritual. When the dancers remove the lion's head, they intentionally shake out the 'lucky charms' (such as candies and grains) from inside the lion's skin, symbolising the spreading of blessings to the world. The performance environment of the Luolong Lion Dance reflects the multi-layered integration of Han and Tibetan cultures in religious, festive, and community life.		

This interview was conducted on 3 July 2024 at Luolong County Square, with the primary focus on Dengba Ani, the fifth- generation inheritor of the Luolong Lion Dance, supplemented by informal exchanges with three apprentices and two audience members. The formal interview lasted about 90 minutes and was recorded and transcribed into a text manuscript. The interview focused on his experience of becoming an inheritor, the historical origins and cultural connotations of the dance, the fusion of Han and Tibetan cultural elements in the performance, the movements and routines, the costumes and props, the typical performance process, and its actual function in community life.

Table 3 Interviews with dance inheritors along the Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road

No.	**Interviewee Information** Dengba Ani	**Date of Interview** 2024.07.03
		Location Luolong County Square
	Interview Question	**Response**
1	When did you become a dance inheritor?	I started learning the lion dance from my father when I was 13. I officially became an inheritor at the age of 20, when my father handed over the props and the drum to me. That was when I began teaching young people.
2	What was the process of inheriting this dance?	At first, only family members performed it. My father taught me. Later, I joined the village art troupe and gradually began performing at festivals and events. Now, I mainly teach the youth in the village, and several of my apprentices can now perform on stage independently.
3	Can you describe the historical and cultural background of this dance?	The Luolong lion dance was originally brought from the Han region by a merchant. Over time, it developed Tibetan styles and movements here.
4	Which elements of this dance come from Han culture and which from Tibetan culture?	The lion dance itself is a Han cultural element — it was introduced from the Han region. The Tibetan elements include the costume of the lion guide and our footwork, which has the feeling of the Tibetan Guozhuang dance.
5	What costumes and props are used in this dance?	The main prop is the lion. As for costumes, what you see — the lion guide wears traditional Tibetan attire.
6	What are the main movement patterns of this dance?	Common steps include the Qilin step, jumping step, and opening-closing step, along with tumbling movements.
7	What is the typical performance sequence of this dance?	The lion guide first leads the lion onto the stage. At joyful events such as weddings, the lion may lick the corner of the bride and groom's clothes or circle the banquet tables to offer blessings for fertility and household prosperity.
8	When and where is this dance typically performed?	We usually perform during festivals or at weddings, birthday parties, or business openings of wealthy families.

To analyse the qualitative data collected through interviews, observations, and field notes, this study employed two qualitative research methods: thematic analysis and discourse analysis.

First, thematic analysis was used to systematically identify, organise, and interpret recurring themes in the data, with a particular focus on cultural fusion elements in the Luolong Lion Dance. The study adopted the six-stage thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Key themes such as 'cultural origins,' 'performance structure,' 'Han-Tibetan symbolic elements,' and 'community functions' were identified through inductive analysis, and these were compared and validated with literature sources to ensure the comprehensiveness and validity of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Secondly, discourse analysis was employed to explore how language constructs identity and cultural meaning, particularly focusing on the discourse strategies used by the inheritors of the Luolong Lion Dance when narrating 'cultural inheritance,' 'ethnic integration,' and 'ritual functions.' Drawing on Foucault's (1972) perspective, this study analysed how individuals participate in the construction of cultural values through discourse within specific historical and cultural contexts, starting from the power-knowledge relationship.

By complementarily employing these two analytical methods, this study maintains the logical clarity of cultural theme analysis while deepening understanding of the process of constructing the cultural meaning of dance, ensuring the scientific rigor and explanatory power of the research findings.

Results

1. Contact between Han and Tibetan cultures (Luolong lion dance)

The Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Trail, as an important trade route in China's southwestern region during ancient times, established an economic exchange mechanism connecting the Sichuan Basin with the eastern Tibetan Plateau over its long history of operation. Within this mechanism, economic exchange was not merely the circulation of goods but also served as a vital medium for cultural interaction among multiple ethnic groups. Luolong County, as a key node in the Changdu region of eastern Tibet, is located at the intersection of the 'Kangzang Route' and 'Chaqing Route' of the Tea-Horse Ancient Road. It has historically served as an important relay station for tea entering Tibet and horses exiting Tibet. Economic exchanges brought a large number of Han Chinese merchants, porters, and artisans to the Luolong region, as well as Han Chinese artefacts, language, art, and customs, thereby laying the groundwork for the interaction of Han and Tibetan cultures in this area.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the formal opening and institutionalised operation of the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Road, large quantities of tea from Ya'an and other areas in Sichuan were transported by porters across the plateau into Tibet. Tibetan horses, medicinal herbs, and furs were also transported along this route to Han regions. During the frequent tea-horse trade, Han Chinese folk artists either performed in exchange for food and lodging or were invited by local nobles and monasteries to perform. In the Luolong area, performances of Central Plains folk arts such as lion dance, dragon dance, face-changing, and acrobatics gradually developed. These performances, with their lively, festive, and auspicious nature, harmonised well with Tibetan festivals and religious rituals, quickly attracting attention among local residents and being partially adopted or adapted.

Therefore, it can be argued that the initial exposure to the Luolong Lion Dance was rooted in the long-standing economic exchange system of the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Road. It was precisely the flow of people, goods, and information brought about by the tea-horse trade that enabled Han Chinese performing arts to emerge and spread in Luolong County, a remote area in eastern Tibet, laying the practical foundation for subsequent cultural selection and integration.



Figure 5 Merchants trading on the old tea-horse road Location: Litang Folk Museum (Source: Photo by Research)

2. The Selection of the Han-Tibetan Fusion Dance: Luolong Lion Dance

Within the historical context of the Sichuan- Tibet Tea- Horse Ancient Trail, dance serves as a crucial medium for cultural exchange, embodying the selective fusion process that occurs through the interactions and exchanges between different ethnic groups. Cultural anthropology suggests that artistic practices often serve as a ‘space’ for social structure and cultural interaction (Bourdieu, 1984). Dance is not merely a form of bodily expression but also a cultural encoding method through which a social group articulates its identity, values, and historical experiences. In the historical context of multiple ethnic groups converging, dance has become an important channel for the construction and reshaping of cultural identity.

The Luolong Lion Dance, as a folk dance with dual Han- Tibetan cultural characteristics, vividly embodies this process of interaction and integration. Ethnologists argue that ‘other elements’ in cultural transmission often require local societal mechanisms of meaning transformation and adaptation to gain lasting vitality (Eriksen, 2010), so any cultural form's flow is accompanied by a ‘localisation’ process. In its development, the Luolong Lion Dance did not simply replicate all elements of the original Han Chinese lion dance but selectively adopted and adapted performance movements, musical rhythms, costumes, and props based on its own cultural environment, aesthetic psychology, and ethnic customs. This ‘cultural selection’ was not a passive acceptance but an active adaptation and innovation, reflecting the dynamic evolution of dance within a multicultural system.

From a cultural anthropological perspective, this selective fusion serves both as a cultural strategy and as a means for an ethnic group to express itself and engage in cultural negotiation at the ‘interaction boundary’ (Barth, 1969). The adaptations and integrations reflected in the transmission of the Luolong Lion Dance not only demonstrate the flexibility and creativity of cultural interaction but also illustrate that ethnic dance is not a ‘static tradition’ but a ‘dynamic cultural entity’ that maintains its vitality through continuous exchange. Therefore, the evolutionary process of this dance form fundamentally reflects how cultural systems in border regions reconstruct and engage in dialogue with ‘self’ and “other” through dance as a ‘symbolic action’ (Geertz, 1973).

The following analysis will examine the selection process of the Luolong Lion Dance within the Han- Tibetan fusion context from four aspects: ‘ movement vocabulary and performance style,’ ‘music and rhythm,’ ‘costumes and props,’ and ‘performance venue.’

2.1 Selection of Movement Vocabulary and Performance Style

The Luolong Lion Dance was introduced to Luolong County by merchants along the Tea- Horse Ancient Trail, originating from the Han Chinese lion dance. According to the author's observations:Its performance style is characterised by its bold, robust movements and majestic grandeur. In selecting dance vocabulary, the lion performers and lead lion dancers build upon the movements of Han Chinese lion dance, incorporating Tibetan pot dance steps and knee-shaking rhythms for lower-body movements, and string dance movements for upper-body movements. The lion performers primarily retain the dance movements of Han Chinese literary lions, such as rolling, leaping, dodging, and spinning.

The author believes that the selection of performance style and dance vocabulary in Luolong Lion Dance is due to the following reasons: 1 The choice of lion dance as a performance form is primarily because the people of Luolong, as followers of Tibetan Buddhism, believe that all things have spirits, and the lion represents good fortune and prosperity in Tibetan culture. Additionally, according to the inheritors, they had never seen lion dance before and were greatly impressed when they first encountered it. Therefore, we can conclude that the people of Luolong chose the lion dance performance form partly because it was novel to them, and the dance's vivid imitation of the lion's movements brought a fresh experience to their lives, enriching their cultural landscape. Thus, Luolong accepted and adopted the lion dance as a performance form. 2) The selection of the pot dance steps and knee-shaking rhythms is because the pot dance is one of the most widely spread folk self-entertainment dances in Changdu, holding a very important position in the hearts of the people of Changdu. The performers of the Luolong lion dance are also Tibetan. Therefore, the selection of pot dance steps and knee-shaking rhythms not only aligns with the dancers' dance habits but also enhances the lion dance's aesthetic appeal and feasibility of being accepted by the local community. 3) The reason for selecting the string dance is that it is as widely spread in the Changdu region as the pot dance, and its upper-body dance movements are very rich and elegant. Therefore, selecting the upper-body dance movements of the string dance can enhance the visual appeal of the lion leader's dance movements and better align with the dance aesthetic preferences of the Tibetan people, thereby facilitating the better transmission and preservation of the lion dance in the Tibetan region.

2.2 Selection of Music and Rhythm

According to the author's observations: The music for the Luolong Lion Dance primarily features drums and cymbals as accompaniment, but the use of gongs has been lost, leaving only drums as the accompanying instruments for the Luolong Lion Dance. The drumbeat rhythm primarily follows a 4/4 time signature, with the emphasis on the second half of each beat, and the drumbeats are performed in a steady, orderly manner.

The author believes the reasons for the selection of music and rhythm in the Luolong Lion Dance are as follows: 1. The primary accompaniment instruments for Han Chinese lion dances are also drums and cymbals. Therefore, after the lion dance was introduced to Luolong, drums and cymbals were retained as the accompaniment instruments. 2. The performers portraying the lion must hold the lion's head and wear a cloth resembling a lion on their backs. Although they can move freely after training, the 4/4 time signature is easier to master due to the limitations of the props.

2.3 Selection of Costumes and Props

According to the author's observations: The lion leader's headdress features red silk threads characteristic of the Kangba region. The upper garment consists of a Tibetan-style vest and a dark-coloured Tibetan robe, with a white long-sleeved undershirt whose sleeves extend to the calves. The trousers are red Tibetan-style silk trousers with cuffs, and the shoes are black leather Tibetan boots. The lion props are now similar to those used in Han Chinese lion dances in other regions, but they are made using iron wire, mud, yak hair, and wool, with colours primarily black, yellow, and red.

The author believes that the selection of costumes and props for the Luolong Lion Dance is based on the following reasons: 1) The lion leader wears a red silk thread on his head, which is a typical headdress of Khampa Tibetan men. In the past, Tibetans kept long hair and liked to braid it with red silk thread. Red symbolises passion, bravery, and masculinity in the Kangba region. Wrapping red thread around the hair signifies adulthood, bravery, and the ability to go to battle or take on family responsibilities. In Tibetan Buddhism and Bon religion, red has the function of exorcising evil spirits, bringing blessings, and protecting the body. Wrapping it around the hair symbolises protecting the soul with sacred power. The Lhong Lion Dance originates from the Kangba Tibetan region, hence the choice of red silk thread. 2) The Tibetan robe is also a traditional Tibetan garment in Lhong. Located on the plateau, Lhong County experiences significant temperature fluctuations between day and night. The sleeve on the right shoulder is typically left down when it is hot and worn when it is cold, combining practicality with aesthetic appeal.

3. The choice of dark colours for the attire is because the herders of Luolong often wear black

The choice of dark colours for the attire is because the herders of Luolong often wear black woolen robes, symbolising simplicity, endurance, and stability. Dark colours also symbolise masculine qualities such as ruggedness, strength, and closeness to the land and livestock. The colours chosen for the lion are black, yellow, and red. Black is often associated with wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism and Bon religion, such as Mahakala (the Great Black One), whose protective deity images are often depicted with black faces. Black also symbolises authority, strength, exorcism, and the suppression of evil, carrying a strong protective meaning; Yellow in Tibetan Buddhism represents wisdom, nobility, and purity; red has the function of warding off evil spirits. Therefore, the colours chosen for the lion dance are black, yellow, and red.



Figure 6 Costumes and props used in the Luolong Lion Dance (Source: Photo by Research)

3.1 Selection of Performance Venues

According to the oral account of the inheritor:The performance venues for the Luolong Lion Dance primarily include squares during festival celebrations, weddings, birthdays, and other such occasions.

The author believes the reasons for the selection of performance venues for the Luolong Lion Dance are as follows: 1) The lion dance holds a sacred place in the hearts of the Tibetan people, so performances held in squares during festival celebrations take place in spacious and well-lit venues, and the lion dance itself is joyful and festive. 2) The people of Luolong believe that the lion dance can ward off evil spirits and is also sacred, while also being visually appealing. Therefore, it is also invited to perform at weddings and birthdays.

In summary, under the backdrop of Han-Tibetan cultural exchange, Luolong lion dance has demonstrated its subjectivity through the selection and localisation of movement vocabulary, musical rhythm, and costumes and props. These choices reflect the interaction between the dance and local religious beliefs, lifestyles, and aesthetic standards after its introduction, as well as the Tibetan people's ability to accept, identify, and recreate foreign cultures. It is precisely through this process of cultural adaptation and reconstruction that the Luolong Lion Dance has gradually formed its unique artistic form, preserving the original spirit of the Han Chinese lion dance while incorporating the local characteristics of Tibetan culture, becoming an important example of ethnic dance fusion in the Sichuan- Tibet cultural convergence zone.

4. The Han-Tibetan fusion dance, Luolong Lion Dance, has been fully integrated.

After the lion dance was introduced to Luolong County in Tibet along the ancient Tea-Horse Road connecting Sichuan and Tibet, it underwent deep interaction with the local folk cultural traditions. During its migration, this dance form not only interacted with existing folk dance forms, living environments, and religious beliefs in the Luolong region, but also selectively absorbed and restructured its movement vocabulary, musical rhythms, costumes, props, and performance spaces to adapt to the new cultural context. Ultimately, it achieved cultural integration, giving rise to the Luolong Lion Dance, which embodies the characteristics of Han-Tibetan cultural fusion.

4.1 Integration of Movement Vocabulary and Performance Style

As analysed in the preceding discussion of the selection of movement vocabulary and performance style in the Luolong Lion Dance, this dance exhibits a distinct dual- source characteristic in its vocabulary structure: on the one hand, it inherits the morphological vocabulary of traditional Han Chinese lion dance, emphasising the expressive and performative aspects of lion mimicry; on the other hand, it incorporates the rhythmic structure and bodily rhythms of Tibetan potzo dance. In the actual performance process, the Luolong Lion Dance generates a composite action system that combines functionality and aesthetic appeal through the structural reconstruction and transformation of action forms from these two types of dance vocabulary. For example, the lion dancers use light, quick steps to mimic the lion's exploratory posture, with movement designs incorporating elements such as the left leg extending forward, the right heel stepping back, and the knees spreading outward. This not only retains the agile and expressive style of Han Chinese lion dance but also incorporates the emphasis on knee joint rhythmic movement from the Potso dance, making the dancers' movements more elastic and grounded. Another example is the handling of the opening and closing steps, which begin with a horse stance, followed by the feet closing inward and quickly pushing off the ground to open outward, creating a dynamic effect with a ‘Potzo-style’ jumping rhythm. The lion leader primarily employs basic movements from the Potang dance, such as tapping steps, stomping

steps, and turns, to guide the lion's movement path and rhythmic logic, achieving a harmonious integration and reinterpretation of Han and Tibetan dance vocabulary in the dance's structural composition. Through this integration of vocabulary, the Luolong Lion Dance preserves the festive core of Han Chinese lion dance—praying for blessings and welcoming auspiciousness while also embedding the daily life atmosphere and aesthetic tastes of Tibetan people, becoming a new dance form with regional and ethnic fusion characteristics.

4.2 Integration of Music and Rhythm

In terms of integrating music and rhythm, the Luolong Lion Dance builds upon the rhythmic characteristics of Han Chinese lion dances while incorporating the rhythmic steps of Tibetan pot dance, thereby forming a rhythm system with a distinctive Han-Tibetan fusion style. Unlike the Han Chinese lion dance, which commonly uses a variety of instruments such as suona, drums, cymbals, gongs, and flutes, the Luolong lion dance, after being introduced to Tibetan regions, retained only two percussion instruments—drums and cymbals—emphasising rhythmic function while de-emphasising melodic elements. This has resulted in a musical style characterised by distinct rhythms, rhythmic pauses, and a clear progression of tempo. The drum and cymbal accompaniment in Han Chinese lion dances has a strong rhythm and clear structure, which is conducive to expressing the leaping movements and rhythmic progression of the lion dance. At the same time, the pace of the pot dance performed by the lion leader is slow and steady, resulting in a difference in rhythmic style between the two. Through the adaptation and reconstruction of rhythm, the Lolong Lion Dance integrates the leader's steps with the Potang rhythm in the slow beats, while the lion's main movements maintain the strength of the lion dance in the strong beats. Ultimately, this forms a rhythmic integration model centred on Han Chinese drum and cymbal rhythms, blended with Potang step rhythms, showcasing the deep cultural fusion between Han and Tibetan cultures in the realm of dance music.

4.3 Integration of Costumes and Props

In terms of the integration of costumes and props, the Luolong Lion Dance also demonstrates the results of cultural selection and adaptation. From the perspective of prop usage, lion dancers continue to use lion heads and lion bodies similar to those in Han Chinese regions. This choice reflects both the inheritance of the traditional Han-style lion dance symbolic system and the preservation of its core visual symbols in the performance ritual. However, in terms of the attire and props used by the lion leader, there is a clear incorporation of elements from the Tibetan Potso dance their clothing is typical of Tibetan Potso dance attire, featuring long sleeves and wide robes. Unlike the common use of props such as ‘handheld embroidered balls’ or ‘feathers’ in Han Chinese regions to guide the lion, the lion leader in Luolong lion dance does not use any handheld props but instead relies on body movements to perform the guiding function. This choice is closely related to the structure of the Potang dance attire: long sleeves and wide robes, when combined with props, can impair the fluidity and expressiveness of bodily movements. Therefore, to ensure the integrity and aesthetic appeal of the movements, the Luolong Lion Dance has voluntarily eliminated the guiding props used by the lion leader in Han-style lion dances, instead relying on bodily movements as the guiding language. This ‘internalisation’ of prop functions represents a cultural adaptation and innovation in the process of dance form integration, demonstrating how different ethnic dance cultures collaboratively construct performance logic, aesthetic systems, and functional expressions within a specific spatial context.

4.4 Integration of Performance Spaces

In terms of the integration of performance spaces, the Luolong Lion Dance demonstrates an inheritance and local adaptation of the original Han Chinese lion dance spatial structure. Performances primarily take place in the festive squares of Tibetan society’s daily life and in private spaces with ritual significance, such as Tibetan households during wedding ceremonies or birthday celebrations. According to the inheritor Dengba Ani, in Luolong,

families with better economic conditions often invite performers to perform the lion dance at important occasions such as weddings or birthday banquets to symbolise good fortune and honour. This choice of performance space continues the traditional spatial function of Han Chinese lion dance, which primarily takes place in festive occasions and life-cycle rituals. Han Chinese lion dances are commonly performed in public or semi-public spaces such as festival fairs, weddings, birthday banquets, and business openings, while Luolong lion dances have been adapted to be performed in spaces imbued with Tibetan cultural semantics, thereby re-coding the 'cultural space.' Therefore, the performance space of the Luolong Lion Dance is not a simple imitation but a transformation of cultural context, enabling the dance form originally belonging to Han society to acquire a new structural framework of meaning within Tibetan society. This 'cross-cultural transplantation' in spatial terms not only preserves the core celebratory function of the lion dance but also facilitates the deep integration of Han and Tibetan folk ritual systems in dance spatial practices.

In summary, the formation of the Luolong Lion Dance is not merely a simple combination of dance forms, but rather a multi-dimensional, multi-layered process of cultural integration. Through cultural transformation in the performance space, restructuring of movement vocabulary, rhythmic fusion of musical beats, and functional innovation in costumes and props, it vividly showcases the artistic achievements of Han-Tibetan ethnic interaction along the ancient Tea-Horse Road of Sichuan and Tibet. As a model of ethnic cultural integration, the Luolong Lion Dance not only enriches the diversity of China's minority dance art but also provides valuable empirical evidence and theoretical references for the study of ethnic cultural exchange.

Discussions

This research fills a crucial gap by systematically applying the contact-selection-integration model to explain how the Luolong Lion Dance actually emerged. Rather than treating cultural fusion as passive absorption or linear assimilation, this study demonstrates that it involves three distinct, observable stages. In the contact stage, the Tea-Horse Road trade network created sustained interaction between Han and Tibetan communities, enabling cultural transmission. In the selection stage, the Luolong community made deliberate choices about which dance movements, musical elements, performance venues, and costumes to adopt from each tradition. In the integration stage, these selected elements were reorganized into a cohesive new form expressing multi-ethnic identity. This concrete application of theory advances understanding of how cultures actually merge on the ground.

Academic and Policy Implications

Documenting the contact-selection-integration process of the Luolong Lion Dance contributes new empirical evidence to anthropological theories of cultural fusion, ethnic identity, and minority cultural practices. It challenges older assimilationist models by showing community agency rather than passive cultural absorption. The research informs heritage preservation policy by demonstrating what comprehensive documentation requires: understanding not just material forms but the historical processes, community decisions, and social functions embedded in cultural practices. These findings support policy priorities emphasizing ethnic cultural exchange and minority cultural recognition (Central Ethnic Affairs Work Conference, 2021).

Community Significance

For the Luolong community, this research creates the first systematic documentation of their cultural heritage. The detailed record of the dance's contact-selection-integration process provides resources for teaching younger generations and supports applications for official intangible cultural heritage recognition. More fundamentally, the research validates the cultural

creativity and agency of the Luolong community by demonstrating how they actively created a meaningful cultural form through deliberate choices during cross-ethnic interaction. This documentation ensures their heritage survives and their contributions to Chinese culture are recognized.

The formation process of Luolong lion dance is a typical case of interaction and fusion between Han and Tibetan cultures, deeply reflecting the dynamic mechanisms of cultural transmission, localisation, and cultural selection emphasised by cultural anthropology. Its development not only responds to the question raised in this study, 'How did the Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road promote the selective fusion of dance cultures between ethnic groups?', but also provides rich empirical material for understanding the process of cultural integration and the formation of ethnic identity.

Conclusion and suggestions

In summary, the formation and evolution of the Luolong Lion Dance fully demonstrate the mechanisms of contact, selection, and integration between Han and Tibetan cultures within the multi-ethnic exchange space of the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Road. From the cultural influences brought about by Qing Dynasty trade activities and military deployments, to the local Tibetan population's adaptations of dance forms, musical rhythms, costumes, and props, the Luolong Lion Dance uses 'other cultures' as its material and 'self-culture' as its standard, developing a performance form that combines ethnic characteristics with cross-cultural implications. This process, as (Barth, 1969) pointed out, reveals that cultural boundaries are not insular walls but interactive fields where individuals and groups continuously negotiate and redefine the relationship between 'us' and 'them' at the boundaries. In terms of dance vocabulary, the Luolong Lion Dance retains the fierce and agile movements of traditional Han Chinese lion dances, while incorporating the footwork of Tibetan pot dance and the upper-body rhythms of string dance, thereby achieving a fusion of 'form' and 'spirit' in its dance language. In terms of music and props, it uses Han Chinese drums and cymbals and incorporates folk-style costumes, reflecting the dynamic process of cultural integration. The 'agency in cultural practice' emphasised by (Bourdieu, 1984) is vividly reflected in this artistic practice: ethnic culture is not passively received but undergoes continuous creative transformation within a social context.

More importantly, as a concrete example of cultural integration, the Luolong Lion Dance not only holds regional ethnographic value but also carries significant theoretical and practical implications. It addresses core issues in contemporary ethnology and cultural anthropology, such as cultural hybridity and the reconstruction of cultural identity (Hall, 1996), while also offering practical pathways to understand 'cultural resilience' and 'cultural adaptation' under the tension between globalisation and localisation. In the current context of multicultural coexistence and the construction of a shared sense of identity among the Chinese nation, the experience of the Luolong Lion Dance demonstrates that cultural fusion is not cultural dilution, but rather an accumulation of cultural capital and a strengthening of identity recognition. This not only deepens our understanding of the cultural circulation mechanisms along the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Ancient Road but also provides robust theoretical support for the protection, inheritance, and innovation of ethnic cultures in border regions.

Future research could further explore how the Luolong Lion Dance achieves intergenerational transmission, cultural re-creation, and cross-media dissemination in contemporary social transformation, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how traditional dance participates in the construction of national cultural identity in a modern context, and injecting unique cultural momentum into the consolidation of the Chinese national community consciousness.

Recommendation

As a representative example of the integration of Han and Tibetan cultures, the Luolong Lion Dance embodies the dynamic process of cultural negotiation and regional identity construction. To effectively protect and preserve this culturally integrated folk art, it is recommended to promote its application for national or provincial intangible cultural heritage status, thereby securing institutional support and establishing a ‘dual-track’ protection mechanism. On one hand, through official inheritor training, the development of school dance programmes, and the establishment of local performance groups, the systematic dissemination of the Luolong Lion Dance can be promoted. On the other hand, through movement notation, musical notation, and digital archiving (including videos, oral histories, and costume diagrams), an academic archive system can be constructed for research and educational use. This protection model not only facilitates academic standardisation but also preserves cultural vitality.

In terms of policy support, it is recommended that local and regional governments implement relevant measures, provide annual subsidies for community performances and training, establish an ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage Ecological Protection Zone’ in Luolong County, and incorporate the Luolong Lion Dance into the border ethnic education and art education system. At the national level, it could be considered for inclusion in the ‘Belt and Road’ cultural cooperation projects to enhance its visibility and promote cross-border cultural exchange.

In terms of cultural tourism and sustainable development, the principle of not compromising the authenticity of the culture should be upheld, and the Luolong Lion Dance should be integrated into the cultural tourism system. For example, during Tibetan calendar festivals, organise live performances, collaborate with local cultural centres to develop interactive exhibitions or digital experiences, and combine dance performances with ecological tourism and agro-pastoral tourism to form an integrated development model of ‘performance + cultural creativity + economy.’ However, all related innovative and promotional activities should be based on community consultation and respect for culture to ensure the authenticity and dignity of cultural heritage.

Future research should adopt a cross-disciplinary perspective, focusing on ethnographic studies of performance to document the dynamic evolution of the form and meaning of the Luolong Lion Dance; conducting sociolinguistic research to explore the intergenerational transmission mechanisms of dance terminology and oral traditions; and conducting cross-regional comparative studies to identify macro-level patterns of dance fusion in the Han-Tibetan border regions. These studies will deepen our understanding of cultural resilience and integration pathways and provide valuable empirical evidence for the formulation of cultural policies.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

1. Systematic Documentation of the Luolong Lion Dance Fusion Process

This research provides the first comprehensive, theoretically grounded analysis of how the Luolong Lion Dance emerged through Han-Tibetan cultural fusion along the Sichuan-Tibet Tea-Horse Road. Prior to this study, knowledge of the Luolong Lion Dance was limited to brief mentions in Luolong County Annals, lacking systematic examination of its origins, cultural components, and integration mechanisms. Using the three-stage contact-selection-integration model, this study reveals the specific pathways through which cultural exchange occurred and how distinct traditions merged into a cohesive new form.

In the contact stage, merchants, porters, and caravans traveling the Tea-Horse Road created sustained interaction between Han and Tibetan communities, enabling the transmission of dance movements, musical styles, and performance aesthetics across ethnic boundaries. During the selection stage, the Luolong community made deliberate choices about which specific dance movements, musical elements, performance venues, costumes, and props to adopt, adapt, or reject from each cultural tradition. This process demonstrates active agency rather than passive cultural diffusion. Finally, in the integration stage, selected elements from Han and Tibetan dance traditions were reorganized and synthesized into a cohesive new performance form that maintained regional characteristics while embodying multi-ethnic identity.

2. Evidence of Community Agency in Cultural Fusion

This study contributes new empirical evidence challenging deterministic theories of cultural assimilation (Gordon, 1964). Rather than passive recipients of dominant cultural forms, the Luolong community actively negotiated, reinterpreted, and creatively synthesized cultural elements (Jones, 2019; Eriksen, 2010). The research demonstrates that communities make strategic choices about cultural fusion based on their specific economic, social, and religious contexts. Local performers and community leaders functioned as cultural mediators and innovators, not merely as transmitters of existing traditions. This finding reveals that cultural fusion processes reflect identity negotiation (Hall, 1996) rather than cultural extinction or linear assimilation.

3. The Tea-Horse Road as a Site of Cultural Creativity

This research reveals the Tea-Horse Road as more than a commercial corridor it was a dynamic space for cultural innovation and exchange. The long-distance trade network created conditions for sustained, multi-generational contact between ethnic groups (Barth, 1969), enabling the development of hybrid cultural practices that served both economic and social functions. The emergence of new forms of ethnic identity that simultaneously honor and transform inherited traditions demonstrates how economic mobility networks directly enable and shape cultural creativity. This finding expands scholarly understanding of trade routes as sites of cultural production, not merely cultural transmission (Liu, 2021; Lu, 2021).

4. Intangible Cultural Heritage Documentation

This study preserves detailed ethnographic and historical documentation of an endangered performance tradition. The comprehensive record includes movement vocabularies and choreographic structures, musical accompaniment and rhythmic patterns, performance contexts and ritual significance, historical narratives from community members and performers, and the visual and material dimensions such as costumes, props, and sacred objects. This documentation creates an irreplaceable academic and cultural record for the Luolong community and serves as a foundation for future heritage preservation efforts (Fei, 1999).

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