



# Cultural Identity of Guangdong Lion Dance in Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Through Anthropological Perspectives

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## Abstract

**Background and Aims:** This study delves into the cultural identity of the Guangdong Lion Dance within the context of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, employing anthropological perspectives to unravel its significance and impact. The aim is to explore and analyze the Guangdong Lion dance's cultural identity in intangible Chinese cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives.

**Materials and Methods:** Employing qualitative approaches, including surveys, interviews, and thematic analysis. A structured interview was designed to gather data on participants' demographics, exposure to the Lion Dance, perceptions of cultural identity, and attitudes toward intangible cultural heritage preservation. Participant selection involved recruiting individuals from Guangdong communities with diverse backgrounds, ensuring representation across age groups, genders, and socio-economic statuses.

**Results:** Reveal the deep historical roots and cultural significance of the Guangdong Lion Dance, highlighting its role as a symbolic representation of auspiciousness, prosperity, and communal unity. Despite facing challenges such as modernization and commercialization, the Lion Dance remains adaptable and relevant in contemporary contexts, showcasing its dynamic evolution and enduring resonance within Chinese cultural heritage.

**Conclusion:** This study contributes valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the Guangdong Lion Dance's cultural identity, emphasizing the need for sustainable preservation strategies, enhanced community engagement, and education initiatives. A significant Chinese intangible cultural heritage requires enhanced preservation efforts through collaboration with local authorities, institutions, scholars, and practitioners and global awareness through cultural exchange programs.

**Keywords:** Lion Dance; Cultural Heritage; Anthropological Perspectives; Cultural Identity; Heritage Preservation; Qualitative Research; Community Engagement

## Introduction

The Guangdong Lion Dance is a vibrant emblem of China's rich cultural heritage, intricately woven with historical narratives, social symbolism, and artistic expression (Avaunt, 2016; Chang & Frederiksen, 2016). As an integral part of Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage, the lion dance encapsulates centuries-old traditions, beliefs, and values that have endured through generations. This research delves into the cultural identity of the Guangdong Lion Dance within the broader context of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, employing anthropological perspectives to unravel its significance and impact (Madhavan et al., 2016; Yap, 2017; Su, 2022; Liu, 2023; Han & Sensai, 2024).

China boasts a diverse tapestry of cultural practices, each contributing to the nation's unique identity and historical legacy. Among these practices, the lion dance holds a special place, particularly in regions like Guangdong, where it has been performed for over a thousand years. Rooted in ancient folklore and mythologies, the lion dance has evolved into a revered art form, embodying intricate choreography, vibrant costumes, and rhythmic music (Xu et al., 2017; Bakeer, 2023; Yao et al., 2023).

The lion dance is not merely a form of entertainment but a symbolic representation of auspiciousness, prosperity, and communal unity. It is often performed during festivals such as Chinese New Year, weddings, and other significant cultural events, serving as a bridge between the past and the present (McGuire, 2015; Sudan & Abdullah, 2024). However, despite its enduring popularity and cultural significance, the Guangdong Lion Dance faces challenges in the modern era, including the threat of commercialization, loss of traditional techniques, and diminishing interest among younger generations (Luo & Hsiao, 2023; Wei, 2023).

The cultural heritage of the Guangdong Lion Dance is at a crossroads, caught between the pressures of modernization and the need for preservation. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and changing societal norms pose significant challenges to the continuity and authenticity of this ancient art



form. There is a pressing need to understand the complexities surrounding the lion dance's cultural identity, its evolving meanings, and how it adapts to contemporary contexts while maintaining its core values.

This research holds immense significance in shedding light on the Guangdong Lion Dance's cultural identity within the larger Chinese intangible cultural heritage framework. The study employs anthropological perspectives to unravel the layers of symbolism, social significance, and historical narratives embedded within this traditional folk dance (Gingrich, 2017; Aristidou et al., 2019). The findings will contribute to academic discourse in anthropology, cultural studies, and heritage preservation and provide practical insights for cultural policymakers, practitioners, and communities involved in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Furthermore, understanding the cultural identity of the Guangdong Lion Dance can foster a deeper appreciation among the general public, both within China and on a global scale. It can help dispel misconceptions, promote cultural exchange, and stimulate dialogue about the importance of preserving traditional arts in an increasingly interconnected world. Moreover, by exploring the anthropological dimensions of the lion dance, the research aims to highlight the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, heritage and adaptation, thus enriching our understanding of cultural continuity and change (Kamkankaew et al., 2023; Guo & Karin, 2024).

## Objective

To explore and analyze the Guangdong Lion dance's cultural identity in intangible Chinese cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives.

## Literature review

The exploration of the Guangdong Lion Dance's cultural identity within the context of Chinese intangible cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives necessitates a comprehensive review of existing literature. This literature review aims to delve into critical theories, concepts, and research findings related to the cultural significance of traditional folk dances, the dynamics of intangible cultural heritage preservation, and the role of anthropological perspectives in understanding cultural identities.

**1. Cultural Significance of Traditional Folk Dances:** Traditional folk dances hold immense cultural significance as they embody a community's history, values, and collective identity. Scholars such as Wong et al. (2021) emphasize the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional dance forms, highlighting how movements, gestures, and costumes convey deeper narratives about societal beliefs and rituals. The Guangdong Lion Dance, with its intricate choreography and symbolic gestures, serves as a living repository of Guangdong's cultural heritage, reflecting historical narratives and community values.

**2. Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation:** Intangible cultural heritage preservation has garnered significant attention recently, particularly within the framework of UNESCO's conventions. UNESCO (2017) emphasizes the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural expressions, including traditional dances, to ensure their continuity and transmission to future generations. Chen (2019) further elaborates on the challenges in preserving intangible cultural heritage amidst modernization pressures, underscoring the need for strategic interventions and community engagement.

**3. Role of Anthropological Perspectives:** Anthropological perspectives offer valuable insights into understanding cultural identities, social practices, and symbolic meanings embedded in cultural expressions like the Guangdong Lion Dance. Scholars such as Yao (2012) and Liu (2019) have explored how anthropological approaches unravel the layers of cultural symbolism, social significance, and historical narratives inherent in traditional dances. Through participant observation, ethnographic studies, and in-depth interviews, anthropologists gain a nuanced understanding of how cultural practices evolve, adapt, and resonate within communities.

**4. Research Theories:** Several research theories inform the exploration and analysis of the Guangdong Lion Dance's cultural identity in Chinese intangible cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives. These theories include, as shown in Table 1.



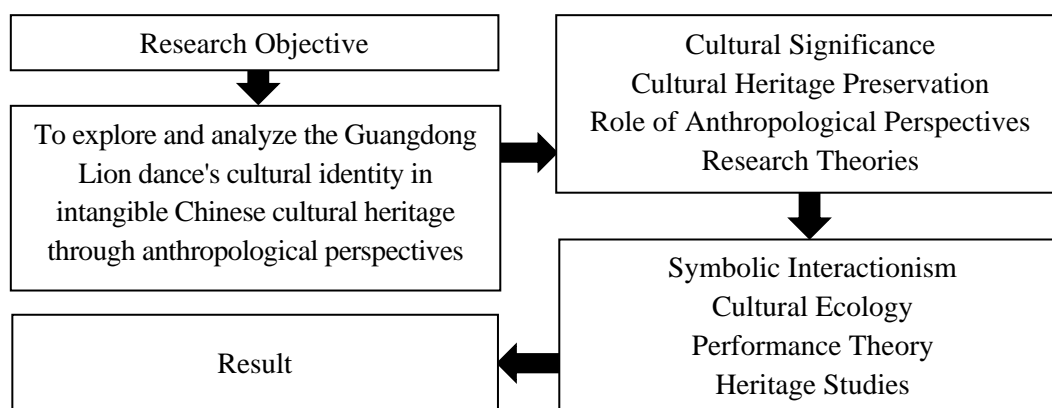
**Table 1** Research Theories

| Theories                | Description  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Symbolic Interactionism | Symbolic interactionism theory posits that cultural symbols, gestures, and rituals have shared meanings within a society, shaping individual and collective identities. Applied to the Guangdong Lion Dance, this theory helps interpret the symbolic gestures, movements, and costumes as reflective of cultural beliefs, values, and social interactions within Guangdong communities.   |
| Cultural Ecology        | Cultural ecology theory examines the interplay between culture and the environment, highlighting how cultural practices adapt to ecological contexts. In the Guangdong Lion Dance context, cultural ecology theory can elucidate how environmental factors, historical developments, and social changes influence the evolution and transmission of this traditional dance form.   |
| Performance Theory      | Performance theory focuses on the performative aspects of cultural expressions, emphasizing how performances convey meanings, emotions, and social dynamics. Applied to the Guangdong Lion Dance, performance theory helps analyze the aesthetic elements, choreographic techniques, and audience reception, shedding light on the dance's cultural resonance and impact.  |
| Heritage Studies        | Heritage studies encompass interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and preserving cultural heritage, including intangible cultural expressions like traditional dances. Drawing from heritage studies perspectives, this research explores the mechanisms of heritage transmission, community engagement, and policy frameworks that contribute to safeguarding the Guangdong Lion Dance as a vital component of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. |

By integrating these research theories and concepts, this study aims to provide a holistic and nuanced analysis of the Guangdong Lion Dance's cultural identity, contributing to the broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation and anthropological perspectives on cultural expressions.

### Conceptual Framework

This study uses various theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism, cultural ecology, performance theory, and heritage studies. Symbolic interactionism interprets the dance's symbolic gestures and costumes as reflecting cultural beliefs and social interactions. Cultural ecology examines the dance's evolution, performance theory analyzes aesthetic elements and audience reception, and heritage studies explore mechanisms for safeguarding the dance as cultural heritage.



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

### Methodology

The qualitative methodology gathers quantitative data on participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward the Lion Dance. At the same time, interviews will provide in-depth qualitative



insights into the symbolic meanings, social interactions, and cultural significance of this traditional dance form, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** The methodology steps

| Methodology Step           | Description  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. Interview Preparation   | Develop semi-structured interview guides based on survey findings and literature review, focusing on key themes such as cultural symbolism, social interactions, historical narratives, and the role of Lion Dance in cultural transmission.                               |
| 2. Participant Recruitment | Select a subset of survey participants for in-depth interviews, ensuring diversity and representation. Obtain informed consent and schedule interview sessions at mutually convenient times.   |
| 3. Interview Conduct       | Conduct semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to elaborate on their survey responses, share personal experiences, and provide insights into cultural identity formation and preservation challenges. Ensure audio or video recording with participant consent. |
| 4. Data Analysis           | Transcribe interview recordings and analyze qualitative data using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, emergent themes, and cultural narratives related to the Guangdong Lion Dance and its significance in Chinese cultural heritage.                       |
| 5. Integration of Findings | Integrate survey data and interview findings to comprehensively understand the Guangdong Lion Dance's cultural identity, its role in intangible cultural heritage, and implications for cultural preservation and community engagement.                                    |

## Results

A profound exploration unfolds in delving into the research results on the cultural identity of the Guangdong Lion Dance within Chinese intangible cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives. This study aims to intricately analyze and understand the intricate layers of symbolism, historical significance, and transformative impact embedded within the Lion Dance tradition. Through a lens that merges anthropology and cultural heritage, this research unravels the profound connections between the Lion Dance and regional identity, the complex symbolism and rituals woven into its fabric, and its dynamic role in fostering cultural continuity and unity within diverse communities.

### 1. History of the Guangdong Lion Dance

The Guangdong Lion Dance has a rich history dating back over a thousand years, originating in China during ancient times. Lions were rare in the region, and their introduction by merchants as gifts to Chinese monarchs played a role in the development of the Lion Dance. The dance gained popularity during the Han Dynasty, with influences from mythical lion-like behaviors leading to its formation. It became widely embraced during the Tang Dynasty and spread to Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, evolving into distinct variations while retaining symbolic elements.

The Guangdong Lion Dance is divided into two main styles: Northern and Southern. The Northern style, characterized by martial arts movements, features performances by one or two dancers imitating adult or juvenile lions. These performances include acrobatic elements such as jumps, climbs, and wrestling, showcasing the lion's strength and agility. On the other hand, the Southern style is performed in pairs. It focuses on lion-specific behaviors like scratching and shaking, often accompanied by symbolic actions such as playing with a ball or engaging in storytelling.

The Lion Dance has also evolved in other Asian countries, leading to diverse variations in Vietnam, Korea, Tibet, Japan, and Indonesia. Each variation reflects local customs and beliefs while maintaining the core symbolism associated with the Lion Dance. The dance's adaptability and incorporation of electronic elements have contributed to its global popularity and contest participation, highlighting its versatility and agility.



Overall, the Guangdong Lion Dance embodies a deep cultural identity rooted in ancient Chinese traditions, martial arts ethos, and symbolic storytelling, making it a significant aspect of intangible Chinese heritage.

## 2. Evolution of Guangdong Lion Dance

The evolution of the Guangdong Lion Dance spans centuries, originating in ancient China and spreading to various Asian countries with similar cultural ceremonies. It is often performed during special occasions such as New Year's Eve, cultural festivals, weddings, and guest ceremonies. According to Chinese cultural beliefs, the dance symbolizes auspiciousness and is believed to bring good luck and protection against hostile forces, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 2** Ancient Lion Dance: It is believed that it can protect people from diseases  
Source: Zhuni Dangxueba, photoed in February 2023

Lions were introduced to China from West Asia along the Silk Road, captivating the imagination of the Chinese populace due to their rarity and majestic nature. Unlike tigers, which often symbolize negativity in Chinese culture, lions were portrayed positively, leading to the development of the lion dance as a traditional and culturally significant art form.

The origins of the lion dance are subject to various interpretations, with some scholars linking it to lion tamers' performances during the Han Dynasty and others associating it with Buddhist processions celebrating Manjushri's birthday. The dance was also influenced by mythical creatures like the "Nian," believed to protect people from illnesses and disasters.

Over time, the lion dance evolved into two distinct styles in China: the southern style and the northern style lion dance, each with unique characteristics and regional variations. This cultural evolution highlights the adaptability and enduring significance of the Guangdong Lion Dance in Chinese intangible cultural heritage.

## 3. Lion Dance and Cultural Identity

The Guangdong Lion Dance holds immense cultural significance within the "Regions South of Five Rivers" in China, shaping regional identity and transcending geographical boundaries to connect Chinese communities worldwide with their ancestral origins. With its intricate symbolism, mesmerizing performances, and deep-rooted cultural relevance, this dance form is a living archive of stories, myths, and histories. The Lion Dance's movements, stories, and collective memory are profoundly connected, resonating with values of security, procreation, and harmony that are meaningful to the community. Performances at festivals and other events strengthen community ties and foster a shared heritage transcending time and distance.

Symbolism and rituals associated with the Lion Dance are crucial in shaping cultural identity. The dance embodies a duality reflecting opposing forces like strength and protection, goodness and power, symbolizing harmony and balance. Rituals such as the "awakening" of the lion, the "plucking of the greens," and storytelling through movements, leaps, and gestures add layers of cultural depth, warding off evil spirits, heralding wealth, and celebrating cultural values, folklore, and historical events.

Case studies and examples demonstrate how the Lion Dance contributes significantly to cultural identity. In Foshan, China, during the Spring Festival, the Lion Dance becomes a vibrant representation

of the community's identity, showcasing historical tales of cooperation and resilience. Similarly, in San Francisco's Chinatown and Penang, Malaysia, the Lion Dance symbolizes community resilience, heritage preservation, and multicultural unity, transcending cultural boundaries and embodying shared narratives of triumph over hardship.

Comparisons between Lion Dance practices in different regions highlight regional variations that reflect diverse cultural sensitivities and historical contexts. While Guangdong emphasizes graceful movements and precise coordination, Guangxi adopts a more theatrical approach with humor and lively interactions. Abroad, the Lion Dance adapts to new cultural paradigms while maintaining its essential qualities, showcasing its dynamic nature and cultural adaptability.

Efforts in preserving and inheriting the Lion Dance as an intangible cultural heritage involve recognizing its profound significance beyond sentimentality. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses ongoing customs, traditions, knowledge, and performing arts that define cultural identities and promote intergenerational exchange. Local authorities and institutions play crucial roles as custodians, advocates, and facilitators in preserving the Lion Dance through documentation, training, and transmission methods. Success stories in mentoring and education highlight the importance of engaging younger generations and adapting to contemporary sensibilities. At the same time, challenges such as modernization and commercialization emphasize the need for balanced strategies that respect tradition while remaining relevant.

Contemporary adaptations and innovations in the Lion Dance, such as collaborations with modern artists, urban-inspired movements, and engagement of younger generations through workshops and training programs, ensure its continued relevance and transmission as a living cultural heritage. By embracing current inspirations while honoring its cultural value, the Lion Dance remains a dynamic expression of cultural identity and continuity, bridging past and present and fostering intergenerational exchange and understanding, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 3** Children Lion Dance, Learning the moves of the lion dance  
Source: Pan Weilin, from fieldwork in March 2023

The impact of globalization on traditional practices such as the Guangdong Lion Dance is profound, as it allows these cultural expressions to reach a global audience. Lion Dance troupes showcase their art internationally through festivals, contests, and cultural exchanges, fostering cross-cultural communication and appreciation. This global exposure has led to cultural fusion as troupes adopt elements from other dance styles and incorporate global aesthetics into their performances. International Lion Dance competitions further demonstrate this fusion, with teams from various countries showcasing innovative choreography that harmoniously blends tradition with contemporary inspirations. The Lion Dance has become a cultural ambassador, reaching diverse audiences worldwide and contributing to the global diversity of human expression, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 4** Lion Dance Performance amid Modernity  
Source: Danlei Xu, from fieldwork in June 2023

However, urbanization presents challenges for the Lion Dance, requiring adaptations to suit urban settings and changing audience preferences. In cities, condensed performances with dynamic choreography and enhanced visual appeal are necessary to capture the attention of busy urban dwellers. Lion Dance troupes have adapted by tailoring their performances for urban environments, incorporating contemporary features while preserving the dance's core elements. Performances at mall openings, corporate events, and community gatherings in cities like Hong Kong demonstrate the evolution of dance to meet contemporary expectations while staying true to its cultural heritage. The Lion Dance's response to urbanization showcases its ability to evolve and remain relevant in changing social dynamics while retaining its artistic essence.

#### 4. Cultural Heritage Preservation of Lion Dance

Intangible cultural heritage is a crucial aspect of a society's identity, encompassing customs, traditions, knowledge, and performing arts passed down through generations. The Guangdong Lion Dance is an intangible cultural treasure that reflects the ideals, aspirations, and identities of diverse locations over time. Local authorities and institutions play a crucial role in preserving the Lion Dance, mobilizing resources, creating specialized projects, and developing platforms for cultural transmission. Local governments provide support networks, official recognition, financial assistance, and strategic planning. Institutions for culture and education also serve as repositories of knowledge, offering opportunities for archiving, studying, and sharing information about the Lion Dance.

Preservation efforts for the Lion Dance extend beyond simple archiving, involving extensive documentation through ethnographic studies, oral history interviews, and audiovisual recordings. Training programs transmit the dance's authenticity and mastery from seasoned practitioners to novices, fostering unity, cultural values, and community identity. Traditional performances, workshops, and community gatherings engage performers and spectators, allowing active stewardship of the dance's history and authentic transmission to future generations.

Successful preservation initiatives, such as comprehensive training programs and educational efforts, have revitalized the Lion Dance among newer generations. However, modernization, commercialization, and financial sustainability pose significant obstacles. Balancing tradition with modern sensibilities and ensuring the transmission of cultural significance remain ongoing challenges in safeguarding the Lion Dance as an intangible cultural heritage, as shown in Table 3.





**Table 3** The summary of cultural heritage preservation of Lion Dance

| Aspect  | Summary  |
|---|--|
| Intangible Cultural Heritage Concept and Importance | Emphasizes the value of intangible cultural heritage in preserving cultural expressions and identities, with the Lion Dance as a crucial example of its significance in fostering cultural identity and intergenerational exchange.                |
| Roles of Local Authorities and Institutions         | Highlights the pivotal roles of local authorities and institutions as custodians, advocates, and facilitators in preserving, documenting, and transmitting the Lion Dance through collaborative efforts and strategic initiatives.                 |
| Documentation, Training, and Transmission Methods   | Discusses the importance of extensive documentation, training programs, and immersive transmission methods in ensuring the authenticity, mastery, and cultural continuity of the Lion Dance across generations.                                    |
| Success Stories and Challenges                      | Presents success stories in revitalizing the Lion Dance through mentoring and education, alongside challenges such as modernization, commercialization, and financial sustainability that impact its preservation as intangible cultural heritage. |

## Discussion

The discussion section delves into the study findings, analyzing them in light of the theoretical principles and existing literature on the cultural identity of the Guangdong Lion Dance within Chinese intangible cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives. It examines how the study results align with or deviate from established theories, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of the Lion Dance's cultural significance.

The history of the Guangdong Lion Dance, as uncovered in this study, aligns with previous studies highlighting its origins dating back over a thousand years and its evolution into distinct styles. This consistency with historical narratives reinforces the enduring cultural heritage associated with the Lion Dance (Chang & Frederiksen, 2016). The discussion emphasizes the Lion Dance's role as a cultural symbol transcending geographical boundaries, resonating with Chinese communities worldwide, and fostering a sense of shared heritage and identity (Su, 2022).

The Lion Dance's evolution reflects continuity and adaptation, consistent with cultural ecology theory. While the dance has preserved its core symbolism and rituals, it has also adapted to modern contexts, as seen in its performances at international competitions and collaborations with contemporary artists (Xu et al., 2017). This dynamic evolution underscores the dance's vitality and relevance in contemporary cultural expressions.

The cultural identity aspects explored in the study align closely with symbolic interactionism and heritage studies, revealing how the Lion Dance embodies shared meanings, values, and social interactions within Guangdong communities (Symbolic Interactionism). Additionally, the discussion delves into the role of local authorities and institutions in preserving the Lion Dance as an intangible cultural heritage, which aligns with heritage studies perspectives (UNESCO, 2017; Sudan & Abdullah, 2024).

Moreover, the findings highlight the challenges of modernization, commercialization, and sustainability faced by the Lion Dance, raising questions about balancing tradition with contemporary demands. These challenges are consistent with previous studies on preserving intangible cultural heritage amidst modernization pressures (Chen, 2019).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study on the cultural identity of the Guangdong Lion Dance within Chinese intangible cultural heritage through anthropological perspectives has provided valuable insights into the dance's historical significance, evolution, cultural symbolism, and preservation challenges. The study's findings align with established theories such as symbolic interactionism, cultural ecology, performance theory, and heritage studies, demonstrating the interdisciplinary approach needed to understand





complex cultural phenomena like the Lion Dance. The methodology, including surveys, interviews, and qualitative analysis, has yielded comprehensive and nuanced insights into participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward the Lion Dance. This methodological rigor enhances the credibility and validity of the study outcomes. The study has contributed to academic discourse in anthropology, cultural studies, and heritage preservation by unraveling the layers of symbolism, social significance, and historical narratives embedded within the Guangdong Lion Dance. Practical insights have been provided for cultural policymakers, practitioners, and communities safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

## Recommendation

1. The Guangdong Lion Dance, a significant part of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, requires strengthening collaborative preservation efforts. This involves partnering with local authorities, cultural institutions, scholars, and practitioners to develop comprehensive preservation strategies. By prioritizing documentation, training, and educational programs, these strategies can safeguard the dance for future generations and promote a deeper understanding of intangible cultural heritage. This coordinated approach ensures the preservation of the dance for future generations.

2. The Guangdong Lion Dance, a cultural heritage of China, is a significant cultural practice that requires global awareness and preservation. This can be achieved through cultural exchange programs, collaborative performances with other traditions, and participation in global heritage events. By showcasing the diversity of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, the Lion Dance can gain greater appreciation and support for preservation efforts. Collaborating with international organizations and researchers can also provide valuable insights and resources for sustaining the dance's vitality.

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