



Sustainability and Inheritance of Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon in Suzhuang Town

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Abstract

This study focuses on Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon, systematically analyzing its origins and development while also examining the inheritance dilemmas, including aging practitioners, youth shortages, and insufficient cultural innovation. It puts forward feasible pathways from digital transformation, tourism activation, and educational inheritance to revitalize the heritage. Digital technologies support precise documentation and wide dissemination, while tourism activation helps realize cultural and economic value; meanwhile, educational inheritance strengthens youth participation and guarantees long-term cultural continuity. The integrated model offers valuable references for the inheritance and revitalization of China's rural intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords

Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon; intangible cultural heritage; cultural sustainability; inheritance; rural revitalization.

Introduction

In recent years, the preservation of China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has received growing attention from both the national government and the broader public. The government has consistently implemented policies (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2021; State Council of China, 2022; Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021) to bolster the conservation and dissemination of these cultural treasures. These endeavors go beyond mere documentation, research, and propagation of ICH projects; they also prioritize elevating public cognizance and reverence through educational initiatives and community involvement. Among the myriad traditional performing arts, dragon dance holds a significant place in Chinese cultural heritage. It not only encapsulates profound cultural symbolism but also nurtures a robust sense of national identity. Nevertheless, many local dragon dance folk heritages are currently confronted with common challenges, including aging inheritors, a youth inheritance vacuum, and rigid inheritance modes amid rapid social transformation.

The Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon is a traditional performance enacted during the Mid-Autumn Festival across 18 towns and villages in Kaihua County, with a history spanning several centuries (Zhejiang Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, 2007). The most spectacular displays are witnessed in Suzhuang Town. These figures, typically fashioned from straw, are meticulously crafted by skilled artisans. The construction of the Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon involves shaping straw into a dragon form and inserting dense incense sticks. As the dance progresses, the incense is lit, transforming the grass dragon into a fiery, cloud-like spectacle under the moonlight, accompanied by swirling smoke and fragrant aromas. The Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon not only embodies high artistic value but also encompasses a wealth of historical and cultural information. This makes it a vital resource for understanding regional folk customs and cultural heritage (Xu, 2010). Since its inclusion on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011 (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, n.d.), the grass dragon has symbolized China's robust commitment to heritage protection and its significant role

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within Chinese cultural tradition. However, existing relevant studies mostly remain at the level of historical description and superficial introduction, lacking in-depth field investigation and systematic discussion on their contemporary community value and practical inheritance dilemmas.

This study examines the preservation and inheritance of the Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon in Suzhuang Town, a nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage of significant historical and folkloric value. Grounded in cultural sustainability theory and based on documentary analysis, field observation, and semi-structured in-depth interviews, this paper analyzes the current state of inheritance and the realistic challenges of the grass dragon heritage in the contemporary era. It proposes targeted sustainable development strategies covering educational inheritance, digital transformation, and tourism activation, to boost the living inheritance and the revitalization of this folk ICH. The research findings also provide valuable references for the protection and revitalization of similar festival-attached folk craft heritage in rural China.

Literature review

This study adopts cultural sustainability theory as the core theoretical framework to guide the whole research. Cultural sustainability is one of the key dimensions of sustainable development, focusing on maintaining the continuity of traditional cultural genes, folk customs, and community identity amid rapid modernization and social transformation (Imbang et al., 2025). As widely noted in the literature, it is often conceptualized as the "fourth pillar" of sustainable development, emphasizing the capacity to retain cultural identity amid change (Järvelä, 2023). Unlike pure ecological or economic sustainability, it emphasizes the protection of cultural authenticity (Pai et al., 2026), the preservation of folk heritage (Afridi et al., 2025), and reasonable, innovative development to meet contemporary social needs (Sihombing et al., 2024). The core connotation of cultural sustainability theory includes respecting historical and cultural roots (Ferrari et al., 2022), maintaining living folk traditions (Chan, 2018), encouraging public participation (Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021), and realizing the coordinated development of heritage protection, cultural inheritance, and local social progress (Järvelä, 2023).

In the field of intangible cultural heritage and folk festival research, cultural sustainability theory has been widely adopted to interpret the dilemmas of living inheritance in traditional performing arts (Lauesen, 2016) and folk rituals (Rozaimie et al., 2023). It provides a solid theoretical perspective to explain common challenges such as inheritor aging (Hu & Zhang, 2026), youth disconnection (Afridi et al., 2025), weakened community cohesion (Jeannotte, 2003), and monotonous communication modes (Afridi et al., 2025). It can thus be seen that this theory establishes a clear research logical path: protecting cultural roots, diagnosing practical inheritance dilemmas, promoting appropriate modern innovation, and achieving long-term dynamic continuity rather than rigid static preservation.

For Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon, a typical national-level ICH folk performance with a long history and deep rural folk roots, cultural sustainability theory is highly compatible with its research context. The inheritance and development of Xianghuo Grass Dragon cannot be separated from the maintenance of traditional craftsmanship, ritual connotation, and village collective memory. At the same time, it also needs appropriate innovation in inheritance modes, digital communication, and the integration of cultural tourism to adapt to modern lifestyles and youth aesthetic preferences.

The cultural sustainability theoretical perspective runs through the entire paper: it supports the analysis of the current inheritance status and realistic dilemmas of Xianghuo Grass Dragon based on field interviews, and guides the formulation of targeted

revitalization strategies from the dimensions of educational inheritance, digital transformation, and tourism activation, aiming to realize the sustainable living inheritance of folk heritage in rural communities.

Global and national context of intangible cultural heritage preservation

At the international level, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage establishes a global framework for recognizing, protecting, and revitalizing living folk traditions (Lenzerini, 2011). Contemporary ICH research increasingly shifts from mere documentation to exploring the contemporary social value of heritage, its community significance, and its contribution to sustainable regional development (Adewumi, 2022). Heritage is no longer viewed solely as a historical legacy, but as a dynamic cultural resource capable of generating social cohesion (Abarzúa, 2004), cultural identity (Baehre, 2015), and economic vitality (Zabulis et al., 2025) for local communities.

In the Chinese context, national ICH policies have evolved from passive rescue protection to active vitalization, utilization, and community-based inheritance (He & Teng, 2024; Long, 2019). The existing literature widely discusses common challenges such as inheritor aging, intergenerational discontinuity, fragmented transmission systems, and the impact of modern entertainment (Zhang & Xing, 2024; Zheng, 2022). At the same time, a growing number of scholars have focused on the diverse contemporary values of festival folk heritage, emphasizing its in-depth functions in maintaining community bonds (Zhu & Liu, 2021), constructing local cultural identity (Xu et al., 2024), and empowering rural sustainable development (Li, 2025).

Nevertheless, most existing studies focus on the social value of festival-related ICH in a broad sense (Zhu & Liu, 2021). Research specifically targeting traditional craft heritage, such as Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon, which survives and is inherited by being embedded in folk festivals, remains insufficient in systematically exploring its community value and revitalization paths, based on field interviews.

Contemporary value and community significance of folk festival heritage

Folk festival heritage is regarded as an indispensable core component of intangible cultural heritage, carrying collective memory (Souza & Laurentiz, 2019), folk rituals (Noh, 2025), and local cultural identity (Özkaya & Birol, 2023) in rural communities. Beyond traditional sacrificial and celebratory functions, modern folk festivals undertake multiple contemporary values in the context of social transformation and rural revitalization.

Firstly, they inherit profound historical and cultural value. Folk festivals preserve ancient agricultural civilization, traditional ritual norms, and folk aesthetic concepts, maintaining the continuity of local cultural genes and providing important symbolic resources for regional cultural inheritance (Wu, 2023). Secondly, folk festivals have an important role in community cohesion. Regular festival gatherings and public ritual activities strengthen neighborhood communication, consolidate interpersonal trust, and shape shared collective belonging among residents (Zhu et al., 2024). Such communal bonding helps maintain stable rural social relations and enhances public recognition of local traditional culture. Third, it contributes to local sustainable development and rural revitalization. Festival folk heritage can rely on cultural–tourism integration (Cerquetti et al., 2022; Méndez & León, 2019), community participation (Rodighiero et al., 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2024), and industrial innovation (Fittkau et al., 2025; Pina, 2015). By deeply integrating with cultural tourism, folk experience and cultural and creative industries, it transforms cultural heritage resources into social and economic benefits, activates rural cultural vitality, and promotes long-term regional development.

Within the broader system of folk festival celebrations, the traditional dragon dance performance stands as one of the most representative and indispensable folk art forms. It is not equivalent to the festival itself, but a core ritual and performance carrier embedded in traditional Mid-Autumn and seasonal festival activities. As a living folk heritage, dragon dance inherits ancient dragon worship culture and festive custom connotations, while also upholding the aforementioned cultural, communal, and developmental values in modern rural society (Chen, 2024; Liang & Krutasaen, 2024).

Research on Dragon Dance and folk performing arts

As a designated national-level ICH listed in 2011, Kaihua's Xianghuo Grass Dragon has a history of over 1,100 years, dating back to the Tang Dynasty, and features distinctive ritual craftsmanship and profound folk cultural connotations. Centered on straw weaving and incense-inserted parade rituals, it integrates traditional dragon worship, Mid-Autumn Festival customs, and ecological cultural beliefs, yet it still faces an inheritor shortage and low youth participation in contemporary inheritance practices (Kaihua County Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 2010; Shen, 2022; Zheng, 2021).

Dragon dance, as a traditional performing art, occupies a central position in Chinese folk culture, embodying dragon worship, harvest prayers, and community celebration (Chen, 2024). Existing studies have explored its historical origin, artistic characteristics, and inheritance dilemmas, including practitioner shortages and shrinking public participation (Li, 2024; Liu & Xiao, 2022). Nevertheless, most literature concentrates on historical description and challenge summarisation, while neglecting two important dimensions:

- The ongoing contemporary cultural meaning of dragon dance festivals for modern local communities;
- How traditional folk performances can be innovated to sustain cultural relevance and support local development.

Local studies on Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon have outlined its history, craftsmanship, and inheritance status, but remain limited to case-specific descriptions, lacking theoretical integration and broader contextual discussion (Zheng, 2021; Shen, 2022). There is insufficient in-depth analysis of its modern community value, cultural reconstruction potential, and systematic revitalization pathways aligned with sustainable development theories.

Research gaps and positioning of this study

A synthesis of the aforementioned literature reveals several distinct research gaps, which this study aims to address.

First, while cultural sustainability theory is widely applied in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) research, its integration with empirical studies of festival-embedded ritual handicraft heritage remains limited. Few localized case studies employ this framework to interpret the internal logic and developmental dynamics of such traditions.

Second, existing studies often prioritize cataloging inheritance challenges and protective measures, paying inadequate attention to the multifaceted contemporary value of folk heritage. The role of traditional craft ICH in community bonding, cultural identity formation, and rural sustainable development has not been fully explored.

Third, current research on dragon dance and folk performing arts predominantly focuses on historical documentation and artistic feature analysis, overlooking the ongoing socio-cultural significance of these rituals for contemporary rural communities. The mechanisms through which innovative inheritance modes sustain cultural vitality require further empirical investigation.

Fourth, prior research on the Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon is largely confined to descriptive historical and textual accounts. There is a scarcity of in-depth, field-based analysis of its practical inheritance dilemmas, community functions, and revitalization potential, particularly from a sustainable development perspective.

In response to these gaps, this study establishes cultural sustainability theory as its core analytical framework. Through field interviews and qualitative case analysis, it systematically examines the Xianghuo Grass Dragon's inheritance status, practical challenges, and contemporary community value. Subsequently, it proposes targeted optimization strategies concerning educational inheritance, digital transformation, and tourism activation. This research seeks to bridge the identified theoretical and empirical deficiencies, thereby contributing to the literature on ICH sustainability and offering practical insights for the revitalization of similar rural craft-based heritage.

Methodology

This study adopts three main research methods: documentary analysis, field observation, and semi-structured in-depth interviews. This paper aims to explore the historical evolution, traditional craftsmanship, current challenges to its inheritance, and feasible revitalization strategies of the national ICH Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon, using Suzhuang Town, Fuhu Village, as a case study. Relevant literature, policy documents, local chronicles, and academic papers were collected from CNKI, Wanfang Database, and official publications, covering the period from 2000 to 2024, which lays a solid theoretical foundation for this research.

The primary focus is on Fuhu Village in Suzhuang Town. Fuhu Village was formed by merging five villages: Fuhu, Zhangtian, Jiaoquan, and Chaling, with a current resident population of over 5,000. The village enjoys a profound historical and cultural heritage, historically known as Shangtang and Changtang.

The field investigation was officially conducted on November 27, 2024. To gain deeper insight into the village's cultural landscape and intangible cultural heritage inheritance, the researcher collected basic information from the village committee and then conducted on-site visits and data collection at the local Xianghuo Grass Dragon inheritance base under the guidance of local staff. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out on December 7 to 8, 2024. A total of nine participants were selected, including intangible cultural heritage inheritors, dragon dance performers, residents, youth students, village cadres, and cultural and tourism staff. The interviewees span different age groups and educational backgrounds, including multiple core stakeholders involved in grass dragon inheritance, ensuring the rationality and representativeness of the first-hand research data (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information of interviewees

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Education	Identity
1	Huade Cheng	Male	75	Junior High School	ICH Inheritor
2	Jianguo Li	Male	50	College	Dragon Dance Performer
3	L. Sun	Male	60	Junior High School	Dragon Dance Performer
4	F. Wang	Female	45	Senior High School	Local Resident
5	M. Zhao	Female	41	Junior High School	Local Resident
6	Q. Shao	Male	35	University	Local Resident
7	X. Chen	Female	18	Senior High School	Youth Student
8	W. Zhang	Male	46	Bachelor	Village Cadre
9	H. Liu	Male	43	Bachelor	Cultural and Tourism Staff

Source: Field interview data collected by the author in Suzhuang Town, December 7–8, 2024.

Note: All ages correspond to the year of field investigation (2024).

The overview of Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon

Historical development

The Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon from Suzhuang Town is a distinctive form of dragon dance with a history that can be traced back several centuries in Zhejiang Province's Kaihua County. Originating in agricultural culture, it was initially performed during harvest seasons, as villagers created folk dances to pray for a bountiful harvest and favorable weather the following year (Xu, 2010). The materials used to make the grass dragon are predominantly natural resources, such as straw and bamboo strips, reflecting the wisdom and creativity of local people. This craftsmanship also embodies their reverence for nature and dependence on natural forces.

According to Huade Cheng, an inheritor of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon tradition, this cultural practice has evolved from a simple agricultural sacrificial ritual into a form of folk performance art that integrates craftsmanship, entertainment, and cultural expression (personal communication, December 2024). This transformation exemplifies Turner's (1969) theory of the ritual-to-performance transition.

Over time, the techniques involved in crafting the grass dragon have become increasingly refined, while the dance movements have grown more varied and dynamic, gradually giving rise to a distinctive artistic style. As villager Jiang Yanlei observed, during annual festivals and community celebrations, the grass dragon dance has become an indispensable component of local cultural life, drawing large crowds of villagers and tourists alike who come to witness and appreciate the performance.

Entering the 21st century, greater attention was paid to the protection of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003; Kurin, 2004), bringing new opportunities for the development of Kaihua Grass Dragon. In 2011, it was officially inscribed on the national list of intangible cultural heritage, marking formal recognition of its cultural and artistic significance at the national level. Subsequently, the Kaihua County government and related cultural departments invested resources in its preservation by providing dedicated funding, cultivating inheritors, and conducting skills training. These efforts aimed to ensure the continuation of this ancient cultural legacy while exploring innovative ways to integrate modern elements into traditional practices, thereby attracting public attention and fostering joint efforts to safeguard it (Smith, 2006).

Since being designated as an intangible cultural heritage, the craft of Kaihua Grass Dragon has seen improvements in craftsmanship, and there have been signs of innovation in its performance forms and content (Bendix, 2009). Taking advantage of cultural exchanges both domestically and internationally, the grass dragon has repeatedly appeared on various platforms for exhibitions and performances, gradually stepping onto a broader international stage.

With the rapid development of internet technology, Kaihua Grass Dragon has entered a new era of digital transformation (Hafstein, 2015). Today, the internet has penetrated every household, and through filming and online dissemination of documentaries (see Figures 1, 2, 3), the unique charm of the grass dragon continues to touch more and more hearts.



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Huade Cheng, a heritage inheritor of Xianghuo Grass Dragon, is recording a documentary to showcase the charm of this ancient craft, introducing the tradition and sharing his experience.

Source: The author, photographed on November 27, 2024, at the Xianghuo Grass Dragon base in Suzhuang Town.

The history of Kaihua Grass Dragon resembles a winding cultural journey - from its origins rooted in primitive agricultural sacrifices to its current status as a nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage. It embodies the profound foundation of traditional Chinese culture and also nurtures vitality and innovation. It is not hard to foresee that, with the joint efforts of various sectors, Kaihua Grass Dragon will project an even more dazzling light in the future timeline of cultural development.

Craftsmanship

The craftsmanship of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon in Suzhuang Town boasts a long history and demonstrates exquisite artistry. Its materials are predominantly natural, with straw, bamboo strips, and hemp rope serving as the main components, subtly conveying the idea of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Specifically, bamboo symbolizes resilience and integrity, while straw represents vitality and toughness. The choice and use of these materials embody the core concept of "harmony between humans and nature" (tian ren he yi), which is a fundamental principle in Chinese traditional aesthetics and philosophy (Luo et al., 2020). When selecting straw, artisans are extremely meticulous, only choosing strong, resilient, and brightly colored straw suitable for construction. Cutting bamboo strips requires fine skill; these are used to create the dragon's skeletal framework. Hemp rope plays a vital role in connecting and securing the dragon's parts, ensuring its sturdiness and durability through a balance of separation and unity.

During construction, artisans first build the dragon's basic framework from bamboo strips. The head, body, and tail are assembled separately, with the head being particularly intricate. Great care is taken to meticulously carve details such as the dragon's horns, eyes, and nose to make the head as lifelike as possible. The body is woven from multiple segments of straw, tightly joined to form a smooth, flowing outline of the dragon's shape. Although the tail's design is simpler, it still needs to harmonize with the overall figure (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Model of Xianghuo Grass Dragon in Suzhuang Town

Source: The author, photographed on November 27, 2024, at the Xianghuo Grass Dragon base in Suzhuang Town.

After weaving, artisans further decorate the dragon with colorful silk ribbons, paper flowers, and various accessories, such as lifelike representations of cranes, butterflies, lobsters, turtles, and scallops (see Figure 5-8), enhancing its visual appeal. A key feature of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon is the embedded internal incense sticks. When ignited, they burn inside the dragon's body, making it appear as if the dragon is illuminated, adding a vivid and lively effect to its appearance (see Figure 9).

The entire process of making the grass dragon is time-consuming and labor-intensive, requiring highly skilled craftsmanship and rich experience. The Suzhuang Town Xianghuo Grass Dragon not only exemplifies exquisite craftsmanship but also embodies profound cultural connotations, representing the wisdom and creativity of the local people (Zbuche, 2022).



Figure 5. Crane



Figure 6. Butterfly

**Figure 7. Lobster****Figure 8. Turtle**

Source: Figures 5–8. Photographs taken by the author on November 27, 2024, at the Xianghuo Grass Dragon base in Suzhuang Town.

**Figure 9. Image of Xianghuo Grass Dragon.**

Source: Photo by Zhang L., Phoenix Net Zhejiang, April 11, 2024.

Performance process

The Xianghuo Grass Dragon performance in Suzhuang Town is a highly entertaining cultural event with profound symbolic significance, embodying wishes for a bountiful harvest, warding off evil spirits, and ensuring peace and safety. Before the performance begins, the dragon dance troupe arrives at the venue to perform preparatory rituals such as sacrificial offerings and “opening the dragon's eyes,” practices believed to imbue the grass dragon with spiritual energy and facilitate a smooth performance.

The performance follows the traditional sequence of “Beginning Moon in the Mountain - Full Moon in the Mountain - Falling Moon” (Kaihua Promotion Website, 2017) (see Figure 10-14), embodying symbolic rituals. During the “Beginning Moon” stage, incense is lit and sacrificial rituals are conducted. The grass dragon coils and dances within the ancestral hall, then proceeds to dance around the village, receiving red envelopes and firecrackers from villagers as a sign of welcome. It is believed that each incense stick lit for the dragon grants a wish (Kaihua News Network, 2023). As the dragon moves and merges with people, it floats into the night sky—seeming to make people's wishes bloom like flowers on a beautiful evening, bringing infinite blessings.

The "Full Moon" stage marks the climax of the performance, when the grass dragon races wildly and dances energetically in the drying yard, attracting a large crowd and creating a spectacular scene. During the "Falling Moon" phase, the grass dragon is carried to the riverbank and thrown into the stream, symbolizing the dragon's return to the ocean and conveying people's hopes and aspirations.

At the climax, dancers execute challenging moves such as jumps and flips, which test their skills and fully showcase the energy and vitality of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon. Throughout the performance, the audience's enthusiasm is palpable, with cheers and applause filling the scene, bringing the atmosphere to a peak. This kind of interaction not only enhances the Emotional Impact of the performance but also reflects the importance of "emotional communication between people" in folk culture (Zou & Li, 2021).

The entire show is seamlessly connected, vividly illustrating the cultural connotations and artistic appeal of Suzhuang Town's Xianghuo Grass Dragon. By watching the performance, audiences can not only appreciate the richness of traditional folk customs but also deepen their understanding of the importance of safeguarding and transmitting intangible cultural heritage (Chen, 2021).



Figure 10. Insert incense into the dragon



Figure 11. Incense lighting



Figure 12. Calling the dragon



Figure 13. Grass dragon dance



Figure 14. Sending the dragon into the "sea"

Source: Kaihua Promotion Website. Title: "Take You Closer to Kaihua's National Intangible Cultural Heritage Project — Xianghuo Grass Dragon." Date: November 3, 2017.

Findings

Views from ICH Inheritor and Dragon Dance performers

This section presents the views collected from one ICH inheritor and two dragon dance performers among the nine interviewees.

As a core provincial-level ICH inheritor, the participant stated that Xianghuo Grass Dragon has a long local history and has been well-preserved as a folk custom (Personal communication, 2024). The activity is held only once a year during the Mid-Autumn Festival, limiting tourist participation and restricting cross-regional popularity. The interviewee also recalled that pandemic control measures once suspended folk performances and reduced public activity opportunities for a long time (Personal communication, 2024). Meanwhile, although government policy and financial support have greatly guaranteed heritage development, the aging of practitioners and the shortage of young successors remain prominent challenges. For talent cultivation, the inheritor has formally recruited two apprentices and organized youth dragon dance teams at local schools to reserve new inheritors (Personal communication, 2024).

“The greatest difficulty is that the grass dragon activity only takes place once a year during the Mid-Autumn Festival, so many tourists cannot experience it. Moreover, the influence is mainly limited to the Kaihua local area, and more promotion is needed” (Personal communication, 2024).

The inheritor further suggested adopting virtual reality technology and developing cultural and creative products to expand cultural influence and promote integrated cultural tourism development (Personal communication, 2024).

Interviews with dragon dance performers showed that they have participated in various dragon dance activities for many years and regarded the folk custom as an important symbol of village unity (Personal communication, 2024). They acknowledged that local government has launched regular training and campus inheritance courses in primary and secondary schools, which provide stable support for youth participation. Nevertheless, traditional word-of-mouth teaching is less appealing to modern young people, and broader online promotion is still required to meet the demands of tourism development (Personal communication, 2024).

“We need to attract more young people to participate. Traditional inheritance relies on word-of-mouth teaching, and modern online communication should be used to cater to tourism development” (Personal communication, 2024).

Views from local resident interviewees

This section summarizes the opinions of three residents with different ages and educational backgrounds.

All local residents recognized Xianghuo Grass Dragon as a precious traditional folk custom with a long history in Suzhuang Town (Personal communication, 2024). However, the cultural influence is still confined to the local region, without sufficient external publicity or brand-building. Most middle-aged residents noted that modern entertainment, such as short videos and online games, has greatly distracted young people’s attention from traditional folk culture, resulting in a low initiative to learn and inherit grass dragon craftsmanship and rituals (Personal communication, 2024). Many interviewees suggested enriching community folk activities and offline performances to strengthen public cultural identity and participation.

Views from youth student, village cadre and cultural-tourism staff

This section includes viewpoints from the youth students, village cadre, and cultural and tourism staff among the nine stakeholders.

The young student interviewee reflected that local young people only have a superficial understanding of the origin and connotation of Xianghuo Grass Dragon, because systematic campus courses and practical inheritance experience activities are still insufficient (Personal communication, 2024).

“We rarely have systematic chances to learn about the grass dragon’s production skills and performance rituals. More campus courses and offline experience activities are expected” (Personal communication, 2024).

Village cadre and cultural-tourism staff indicated that policy support and special funding have provided solid guarantees for regular folk performances and heritage training (Personal communication, 2024). They also pointed out that the current inheritance mechanism lacks systematic norms, digital dissemination is lagging, and the integration between grass dragon culture and rural tourism remains superficial. It is suggested that online publicity be strengthened, that cultural and tourism experience projects be developed, and that school inheritance be continued to attract more young participants (Personal communication, 2024).

Current status: inheritance and challenges

As a nationally designated intangible cultural heritage, the inheritance status of the Kaihua County Suzhuang Xianghuo Grass Dragon exhibits typical “policy-driven” characteristics (Jiao et al., 2024). The local government has established a dedicated exhibition hall for the Xianghuo Grass Dragon by renovating an office building, systematically preserving and displaying physical artifacts and historical materials related to the grass dragon, thereby strengthening the cultural spatial infrastructure (Shen, 2022).

Additionally, by incorporating the county-level intangible cultural heritage inheritor evaluation system (currently, the county has 13 provincial-level inheritors) and by exploring youth transmission pathways through school clubs (Phoenix Net Zhejiang, 2024). Suzhuang Town Junior High School was designated as the “Zhejiang Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance and Education Base” in 2010, becoming a key platform for promoting intangible cultural heritage (ICH) education in local schools. The base centers on projects such as the grass dragon dance and other ICH initiatives, and on syllabus development and campus inheritance activities. In 2023, the base also hosted the “Celebrating the Asian Games and National Day” dragon dance event (see Figure 15). Thus, a multi-layered inheritance mechanism has been formed.

Simultaneously, the entire town has invested over 1.5 million yuan, completing repairs, lighting, paving, and landscaping of the surroundings for 21 ancestral halls (Kaihua News Network, 2012). These efforts collectively form a systematic support - from physical preservation to active heritage transmission and cultural tourism transformation - providing a comprehensive policy framework for safeguarding and promoting the grass dragon tradition.



Figure 15. Dragon Dance Event

Source: Photo provided by Kaihua County Social Sciences Federation, October 9, 2023.

As a designated representative inheritor of Zhejiang Province's intangible cultural heritage, Huade Cheng has systematically conducted the transmission of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon craft since 1982. His practice exemplifies an integrated approach characterized by intergenerational continuity, community participation, and cultural interpretation (Yang et al., 2024). In terms of craftsmanship training, he cultivates new inheritors through hands-on instruction, such as weaving the dragon's head and inserting incense sticks. After becoming the president of the Suzhuang Town Grass Dragon Association in 1995, he organized youth performance teams through institutional arrangements, forming a training echelon encompassing three generations: elders, middle-aged, and youth. His family members, including his grandson Hongbin Cheng, actively participate in ritual activities, demonstrating a dual pathway of skills transmission rooted in both family and community settings (Kajta, 2023).

In terms of cultural dissemination, Cheng emphasizes the public transformation of knowledge systems. For instance, in 2023, he analyzed the technical details and spiritual connotations of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon for a summer practice group at Zhejiang Agricultural and Forestry University, including traditional prayer practices dating back to the Tang Dynasty. Through academic exchanges, he strengthened his understanding of this intangible cultural heritage project (Mao & Zhang, 2022). This model, which combines practical skills training with cultural education, not only safeguards the authenticity of the craft but also promotes the social recognition of its value.

However, as a national intangible cultural heritage, the transmission of Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon faces numerous challenges. Primarily, there is a cognitive dilemma within the inheriting community. The traditional knowledge system, predominantly held by the elderly, is gradually fragmented, leading to a discontinuity in core skills. Younger generations and primary and secondary school students have insufficient understanding of its cultural connotations, resulting in clear intergenerational gaps and a decline in awareness, which, in turn, fosters pessimistic attitudes about its future development (Zheng, 2022). Secondly, the methods of transmission lack innovation, as they predominantly rely on traditional festivals and community-led practices, with limited incorporation of modern technological tools and digital platforms (Wang, 2016). This reliance on conventional practices has resulted in a widening generational gap in cultural engagement (Zhang, 2023), with younger audiences often feeling detached or less motivated to participate.

Additionally, societal demographic changes driven by modernization also impact the transmission mechanisms (Li, 2016). Population outflow, evolving values, and the influence of Western culture gradually weaken the reverence for traditional religious beliefs and cultural sacredness, diminishing the sense of identity with local culture. Simultaneously, the diversification of modern entertainment and the integration of Western sports culture further reduce public attention and participation in traditional dragon dance activities (Fu, 2024). In terms of resource utilization, there is insufficient market development of cultural resources, a lack of distinctive brands and innovative products, and an inability to embed this cultural asset into rural revitalization strategies effectively. This results in the cultural value not being fully transformed into economic and tourism resources, with influence limited to regional levels, thereby hindering broader promotion and sustainable development (Zheng, 2022). Moreover, policy support and a systematic protection framework remain inadequate, lacking long-term mechanisms and incentive measures. The shortage of skilled talents and the urgent need to optimize the cultural inheritance system further pose significant obstacles to the continuous development and active transmission of Xianghuo Grass Dragon.

Sustainable preservation and revitalization strategies

Recommendations for digital transformation

In the process of promoting the digital transformation of Xianghuo Grass Dragon in Suzhuang Town, exploring modern technological means is crucial to both preserving this traditional art form and facilitating its widespread dissemination. The integration of digital technology not only opens new possibilities for protecting the Xianghuo Grass Dragon but also helps expand its influence and deepen its cultural roots (Liu & Deng, 2017). Such innovative approaches can inject renewed vitality into this cultural heritage, ensuring its sustainability and long-term vitality.

Suzhuang Town can leverage advanced digital recording techniques, such as digital photography and three-dimensional (3D) scanning, to create comprehensive digital archives of the Xianghuo Grass Dragon. These tools serve as precise and sensitive recorders, capable of capturing the intricate details of their shape, movement, and color, which can then be transformed into digital models and data formats. This groundwork provides a basis for future initiatives, such as digital restoration and promotion, in which digitized artifacts can be displayed on online platforms for public appreciation or used in educational and research contexts. This approach broadens access and engagement, enabling a wider audience to recognize and interact with this intangible cultural heritage (Gao, 2024).

Furthermore, Suzhuang Town possesses considerable potential in digital dissemination; the internet and social media platforms have become powerful tools for cultural promotion. Establishing official websites and managing social media accounts can serve as channels to vividly showcase the origins, cultural connotations, craftsmanship, and live performances of Xianghuo Grass Dragon. These digital platforms not only provide broader visibility for the art form but also foster audience interaction through sharing and engagement functionalities, thereby inspiring public enthusiasm and participation (Walmsley, 2016). The popularity of short-video platforms, in particular, significantly amplifies the presence of this intangible cultural heritage across various online terminals, successfully attracting the attention of younger audiences and generating interest and affection towards the tradition (Feng, 2023).

Additionally, integrating virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies into the promotional efforts offers promising avenues for innovation (Ozdemir, 2021). VR can simulate immersive experiences, allowing viewers to attend performances virtually and feel the unique artistic atmosphere in a highly engaging manner. Conversely, AR can embed information about Xianghuo Grass Dragon into real-world scenes, creating interactive and entertaining experiences. Such technological

implementations not only diversify dissemination channels but also considerably enhance the attractiveness and influence of this cultural heritage.

Tourism activation strategies

Based on theories of dynamic inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) (UNESCO, 2003; Rajapakse, 2017; Liu, 2022), it is recommended that Xianghuo Grass Dragon be developed as a core cultural tourism IP. This involves establishing a regular performance mechanism by organizing periodic traditional shows with ceremonial significance; concurrently, immersive experiential activities such as grass dragon-making workshops and dragon dance skill training should be developed to deepen visitors' understanding and emotional connection with the heritage through interactive participation (Dogan & Kan, 2020).

From a tourism geography perspective, a regional tourism network centered around Xianghuo Grass Dragon should be constructed (Hassink & Ma, 2016). Spatial planning should integrate performance venues with surrounding natural and cultural landscapes to create a cultural-ecological themed tourism route (Timothy & Boyd, 2015). Additionally, collaboration with tourism enterprises can facilitate the design of themed product packages that combine accommodation, dining, and guided tours (Sotiriadis, 2017), thereby enhancing the destination's overall appeal and increasing visitor engagement.

In line with the principles of visitor experience management, the tourism service system must be systematically optimized (Lv et al., 2025). This includes upgrading the hardware facilities and safety standards of performance sites, utilizing modern audio-visual technology to enhance the viewing experience, and establishing professional intangible cultural heritage interpretation teams. Through standardized training, cultural explanations can be made more accurate and engaging (Black & Mendenhall, 1990), balancing educational functions with entertainment and enriching audiences' overall experience.

These strategies collectively form a comprehensive model for the revitalization of ICH tourism. By integrating project innovation, resource pooling, and service enhancement, they not only safeguard the authentic transmission of Xianghuo Grass Dragon but also generate economic benefits to support its preservation, ultimately fostering a virtuous cycle of cultural continuity and regional development.

Conclusion

This study focuses on Kaihua Xianghuo Grass Dragon, systematically analyzing its origins and development, while also examining the challenges it faces and pathways for sustainable inheritance in the context of modern society. By identifying issues encountered in its transmission, including knowledge gaps among aging practitioners, low youth participation, and a lack of cultural innovation, the research clearly highlights the difficulties this traditional craft faces amid rapid social change. Digital transformation and tourism activation are proposed as key strategies; by promoting the deep integration of information technology and cultural practices, these approaches aim to rejuvenate Xianghuo Grass Dragon with new vitality. Digital technologies can facilitate precise documentation and broad dissemination of the craft, while also stimulating interest among younger audiences, thereby ensuring the continuation of its living cultural tradition.

Based on this foundation, tourism development strategies emphasize positioning Xianghuo Grass Dragon as a central cultural intellectual property (IP), establishing regional tourism networks, and enhancing interactive experiences - creating pathways for cultural economic transformation and ongoing preservation. In the future, the integrated development model that combines modern technology with regional tourism

resources offers a valuable reference for the preservation of Kaihua's intangible cultural heritage and China's rich heritage as a whole. It holds the promise of fostering long-term mechanisms for cultural transmission, ensuring that these precious cultural assets continue to flourish and shine brightly in the new era.

The present study also offers significant theoretical contributions. By taking cultural sustainability theory as the core analytical framework, this paper demonstrates its adaptability for interpreting the living inheritance of folk performing arts embedded in traditional festivals. It further supplements and enriches theoretical research on the contemporary connotations and community value of dragon dance-related intangible cultural heritage. Practically, the research findings and proposed strategies provide practical implications for local cultural governance, heritage inheritance, and rural tourism development. The pathways of digital transformation and tourism activation can serve as effective references for optimizing inheritance mechanisms, broadening cultural dissemination, and facilitating rural revitalization.

Nevertheless, this study still has several limitations. It focuses solely on Suzhuang Town as a single case, with a limited interview sample. Future research can expand the investigation to more relevant villages and adopt a larger sample for comparative analysis. In addition, combined quantitative methods can be employed to explore youth inheritance intentions and the operational mechanisms of ICH-tourism integration, thereby constructing a more systematic and sustainable revitalization model for similar folk heritage.

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