



RESEARCH ON THE CULTURAL SYMBOLISM OF THE MILUO RIVER DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL IN HUNAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival, as an important component of traditional Chinese culture, embodies a rich historical heritage and national spirit within its cultural symbol system. In the context of globalization and modernization, this cultural legacy faces both challenges to its transmission and opportunities for innovation. **Objectives:** 1) To explore the historical evolution of the cultural symbols of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival and analyze their cultural connotations and symbolic meanings across different historical periods. 2) To construct a cultural symbol system for the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival, identify core and variable symbols, and examine their paths of inheritance and innovation in contemporary society. **Method:** This study employed a qualitative research paradigm, combining documentary analysis with autoethnography. As a native of Miluo, the researcher conducted a systematic interpretation of the cultural practices of local inheritance communities (including folklore experts, dragon boat rowers, and residents) in Miluo City, Hunan Province (the Miluo River basin), based on long-term participatory observation and cultural reflection on the Dragon Boat Festival customs. **Result:** 1) The cultural symbols of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival have evolved from ancient dragon worship and plague prevention to commemorating Qu Yuan, with their connotations continuously enriching. 2) The symbol system can be categorized into three levels: material symbols (zongzi, dragon boats, wormwood), behavioral symbols (dragon boat racing, sacrificial rituals, hanging calamus), and spiritual symbols (Qu Yuan's spirit, unity, and prayer for blessings). 3) Core symbols (the festival date, the original meaning of

plague prevention) exhibit high stability, ensuring traditional continuity, while variable symbols (the shift from dragon worship to commemorating Qu Yuan, integration with sports and tourism) reflect cultural adaptability. Based on these findings, a modern transformation model for the cultural symbols of the Dragon Boat Festival was constructed. **Conclusion:** The findings reveal that the cultural symbol system of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival possesses both a stable core and a dynamic evolutionary mechanism. Its inheritance requires safeguarding core symbols while promoting the innovative transformation of variable symbols through digital media and creative industries, providing theoretical support and practical pathways for the modernization of traditional culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of China's four major traditional festivals, the Dragon Boat Festival holds profound cultural significance. The Miluo River is renowned as the "Origin of the Dragon Boat Festival" and the "Hometown of Dragon Boats" because Qu Yuan drowned himself here. In 2009, the "Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival Customs," as a vital component of the broader Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, were inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Miluo City, located in northeastern Hunan Province, China, is a crucial birthplace of Chu culture. Its Dragon Boat Festival traditions center on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month and extend to the fifteenth day, known as the "Great Duanwu," forming a unique "Half-Month Festival" tradition. Local inheritor communities, including folklore experts, dragon boat craftsmen, ritual presiders, and riverside residents, sustain this cultural heritage through oral transmission and communal practice.

The Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival has undergone a historical transformation from ancient Yue dragon totem worship to the commemoration of Qu Yuan. Following Qu Yuan's drowning in 278 BCE, the original dragon worship rituals merged with commemorative activities, forming a system of customs including dragon boat racing, eating zongzi, and hanging mugwort and calamus. However, modernization has presented dual challenges to these cultural symbols. On one hand, the gradual passing of older heritage bearers places traditional skills at risk of disappearing. On the other hand, the emotional connection between younger generations and traditional culture is gradually weakening.

This study, from the perspective of semiotics, systematically investigates the cultural symbols of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival. It aims to explore their historical evolution, symbolic constitution, the distinction between core and changing symbols, and pathways for transmission and innovation in the contemporary context. By addressing these questions, this research seeks to explicate the internal logic and symbolic significance of these cultural symbols, thereby providing theoretical support and practical references for the modern transmission of traditional culture.

2. OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the historical evolution of the cultural symbols of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival, analyzing their cultural connotations and symbolic meanings across different historical periods.
2. To construct a system of cultural symbols for the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival, clarifying core and variable symbols, and exploring their paths of inheritance and innovation in modern society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, the Dragon Boat Festival has long been a focus of scholarly attention regarding its origins and development. The Miluo River, as the site where Qu Yuan drowned, endows the festival with unique cultural significance, making it a quintessential case for studying the construction and evolution of festival symbols. This review synthesizes relevant research from three perspectives - origins, theoretical frameworks, and evolutionary mechanisms.

1. Multiple explanations for the festival's origin

Scholars have proposed multiple explanations for the origins of the Dragon Boat Festival, reflecting the cultural conceptions of different regions and ethnic groups. First, the Summer Solstice Theory posits that the festival originated from summer solstice observances. Both Zong Lin's *Jingchu Suishiji* from the Northern and Southern Dynasties and Zhou Chu's *Fengtu Ji* from the Jin Dynasty note the similarities between the customs of the two festivals, with ancient people holding sacrifices on the summer solstice - the day of peak yang energy - to pray for bountiful harvests (Zong, 2018)^[11] Second, the Numerical Symbolism Theory emphasizes the significance of the fifth day of the fifth month, as ancient Chinese regarded odd numbers as auspicious; such numerical veneration is also evident in festivals like the first day of the first month and the third day of the third month (Guo, 2019)^[5] Third, the Malignant Day Theory considers the fifth day of the fifth month as an inauspicious time when epidemics were prevalent, necessitating rituals to ward off evil and toxins, giving rise to customs such as hanging mugwort and tying five-colored silk threads (Shi, 2023)^[7] Fourth, the Commemoration of Historical Figures Theory involves figures such as Wu Zixu, Cao E, and Jie Zhitui, as documented in the *Cao E Stele*, *Fan Ye's Book of the Later Han: Biographies of Exemplary Women*, and *Cai Yong's Qin Cao*, respectively, reflecting regional veneration of loyal and filial individuals (Fan, 1965^[3]; Cai, 1985)^[1]. Fifth, the Celestial Phenomenon Worship Theory connects the festival to the movement of the Azure Dragon Seven Mansions, with the dragon constellation positioned due south in midsummer, regarded as an auspicious sign worthy of sacrifice. Sixth, the Dragon Totem Worship Theory argues that customs such as eating zongzi, dragon boat racing, and tying five-colored silk threads are all dragon-related, suggesting the festival originated as a dragon totem sacrifice among the ancient Yue people. These explanations are not mutually exclusive but rather reveal, from different perspectives, the diverse origins of the festival's cultural symbols.

2. The Construction of Dragon Boat Festival Culture from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding the generation and evolution of Dragon Boat Festival cultural symbols. This theory emphasizes that meanings are constructed through the interpretation of symbols in social interaction. The various customs - zongzi, dragon boats, mugwort, five-colored silk threads - are symbols whose connotations shift with historical context and group interaction. For instance, dragon boats transformed from totemic offerings into vessels commemorating Qu Yuan; zongzi evolved from sacrificial food into a symbol of patriotic spirit. This process exemplifies meaning being recreated through interpretation. Different origin theories represent meanings ascribed to the same festival by different communities, which merged to form the symbol system known today. Qu Yuan's drowning endowed the local festival with powerful patriotic symbolism, making it a classic case of the "definition of the situation" in symbolic interaction.

3. The Uniqueness and Evolutionary Mechanism of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival

The distinctiveness of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival lies primarily in its profound connection to Qu Yuan. Liu (2009)^[6] notes that as the site of Qu Yuan's martyrdom, Miluo has historically centered its festival on commemorating him, with rituals and dragon boat racing imbued with loyalist connotations.

Furthermore, the Miluo River basin is an agricultural region where the festival coincides with the rainy season; ancient peoples regarded dragons as water deities, preserving numerous dragon totem customs. Regarding its evolutionary mechanism, the festival has undergone continuous cultural fusion. Early elements such as summer solstice sacrifices and dragon star worship were gradually integrated into the mainstream narrative commemorating Qu Yuan. From the Han Dynasty onward, with empire unification and population migration, customs from various regions converged, shifting the festival's focus from nature worship to humanistic commemoration while incorporating new forms such as sports and entertainment (Zeng & Wang, 2022)^[10] This process embodies meaning accumulation and reconstruction: core symbols remain stable while changing symbols are renewed in response to social change.

In summary, existing research has illuminated the festival's origins and evolution but has largely focused on historical textual research, lacking theoretical analysis of symbolic construction. Introducing Symbolic Interactionism helps elucidate how cultural symbols acquire meaning through group interaction and why the Miluo River festival became a symbol of patriotic spirit.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research paradigm, systematically analyzing the cultural symbols of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival through the following three methods:

1. Documentary Research Method

Through systematic retrieval and examination of ancient texts (such as *Jingchu Suishiji* and *Fengtuo Ji*), academic papers, local chronicles, images, and audiovisual materials, relevant records of cultural symbols were collected. Synchronic analysis was employed to explore connections among cultural symbols across different historical periods, aiming to comprehensively understand the current state of research and provide systematic cultural materials for subsequent symbolic interpretation. This fundamental research approach focuses on organizing cultural materials and clarifying historical contexts.

2. Fieldwork Method

From June 2023 to June 2024, field visits were conducted to the Qu Yuan Cultural Park and surrounding heritage sites in Miluo City, Hunan Province. Participant observation and visual documentation were combined: the researcher observed local residents' daily lives and customary practices during the festival, while systematically collecting primary visual data including photographs and videos. This applied research approach aims to provide vivid local knowledge for interpreting cultural symbols through firsthand experience and objective documentation.

3. Interdisciplinary Analysis Method

Employing semiotics as the core theoretical tool, this study draws upon relevant theories from design studies, art studies, folklore studies, cultural studies, and anthropology to construct a multi-dimensional analytical framework. Specifically, image theory interprets the visual presentation of symbols; communication model theory analyzes dissemination pathways; audience theory examines different groups' reception and interpretation; social change theory explores dynamic evolution; and entropy theory examines orderly and disorderly transformations in cultural transmission. This theoretical framework aims

to transcend disciplinary boundaries and achieve a multi-perspective, in-depth study of the cultural symbol system.

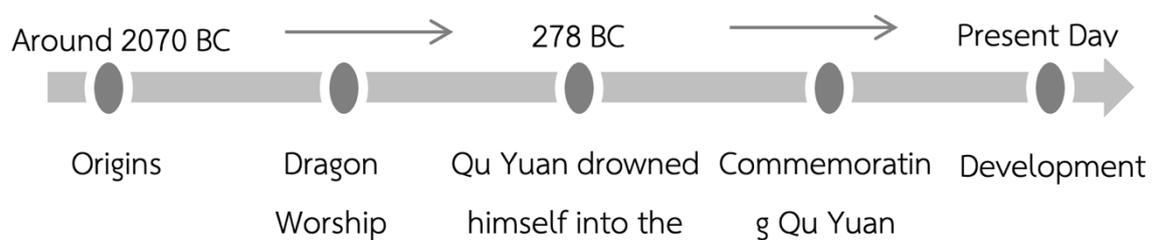
5. RESULTS

1. Historical Evolution of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival Culture

The Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival originated from the ancient Yue ancestors' dragon worship rituals conducted during the summer solstice, reflecting their aspirations for a better life. The historical event of Qu Yuan's drowning in the Miluo River brought profound changes to the existing customs, enriching the festival's cultural connotations and giving rise to numerous new traditions. Scholars, taking "Qu Yuan's river suicide" as a pivotal point, generally divide the historical evolution of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival into three main stages: the period of dragon worship, the period of Qu Yuan's drowning, and the period of commemorating Qu Yuan (as shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1

Historical Development and Evolution of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival



Source: Constructed by researcher

The culture of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival can be broadly categorized into three levels: 'material - behavior - spirit' (Ding & Clark, 2003)^[2]. The material culture includes all cultural objects produced and the lifestyle observed during the festival, such as zongzi (rice dumplings), scented sachets, herbs, and dragon boats. The behavioral culture involves interactions and social activities conducted according to traditional rituals and customs, including the Dragon Worship Ceremony, the exchange of zongzi and scented sachets, and participation in the Duanwu bath. The spiritual culture encompasses the ways of thinking and values that arise from people's social consciousness activities during the festival, as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Division of Cultural Levels of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival



Source: Constructed by researcher

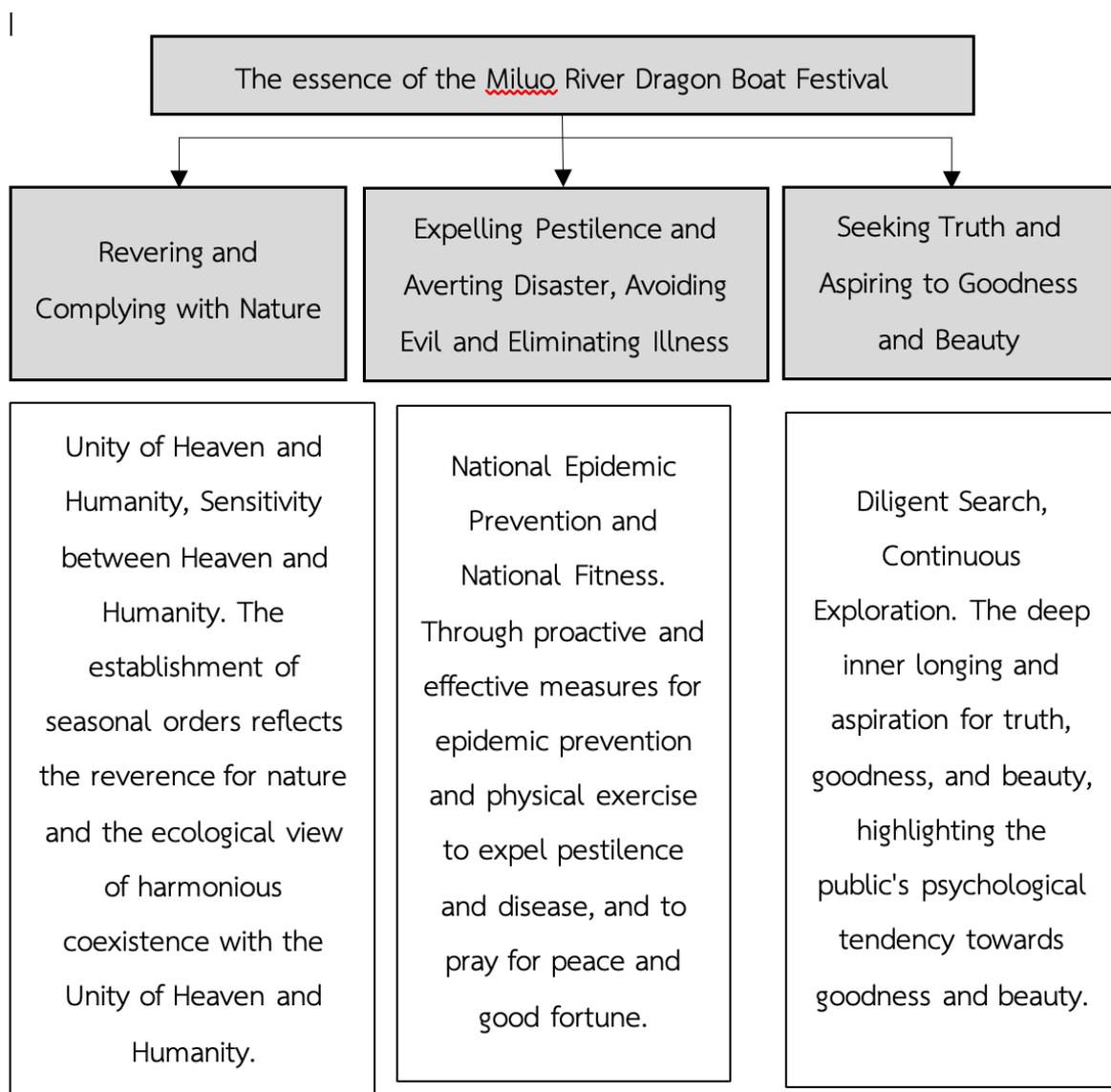
The original core theme of the festival was to drive away plagues, avert disasters, and prevent diseases. Dragon worship ceremonies prayed for favorable weather and harvests; hanging calamus and wormwood sought to ward off disasters and invoke health. Following Qu Yuan's drowning, the festival's cultural significance was elevated to a spiritual pillar, incorporating new dimensions including patriotism, the spirit of exploration, and people-oriented philosophy.

2. Construction of the Cultural Symbol System: Based on semiotic theories, this study introduces the concepts of "core symbols" and "changing symbols" to analyze inheritance and variation phenomena within the festival culture.

2.1 Core Symbols: 'Core symbols' inherit the essential connotation of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival, reflecting its universal significance. Despite changes in dynasties and local dissemination, the basic connotation of the Dragon Boat Festival has remained largely unchanged, allowing us to identify it among various recorded phenomena (Song, 2007)^[8]. The customs of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival have evolved over time and with changes in aesthetic concepts, but its core has not fundamentally changed. This stability ensures that the cultural symbols of the Dragon Boat Festival remain vibrant, preserving the heritage of festival culture. The core symbols of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival primarily include the festival date and its original meaning. Firstly, the date of the Dragon Boat Festival is traditionally set on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. Originally referring to 'the fifth month and the fifth day,' it was established as the 'fifth day of the fifth month' after merging with the summer solstice and has been largely fixed since the Han dynasty. According to legend, Qu Yuan jumped into the river on this day, and his body was recovered on the fifteenth day, leading the people of Miluo to also celebrate on the fifteenth day (known as the Great Duanwu) in his memory. After the Great Duanwu, the festival is considered complete, but it is centered on the fifth day of the fifth month (Gong, 2013)^[4]. Secondly, the original meaning of the Dragon Boat Festival is to drive away pests, avert disasters, and eliminate illness. It is a festival that values nature, follows its principles, and aspires to goodness and beauty. The timing of the festival, along with the behaviors, food, rituals, and activities, aim to protect the peace, cleanliness, and health of individuals, families, and homes, reflecting a deep inner yearning for truth, goodness, and beauty, which is a common wish of all (Yue, 2016)^[9] (as shown in Figure 3).

Figure 3

The essence of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival



Source: Constructed by researcher

2.2 Changing symbols: Changing symbols embody diversity and variability. Synchronically, they reinforce distinctive local elements, maintaining cultural identity and enhancing community cohesion. Diachronically, they highlight characteristics of specific eras; some customs are period-specific, while enduring customs continue evolving in names, functions, production methods, and expressions. This study analyzes three key historical periods: (1) Before Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Miluo River Cultural symbols centered on dragon worship, including the Azure Dragon Seven Mansions (celestial dragon constellation), Five Poisons, and horn-shaped millet (zongzi prototype). Ancestors observed the night sky during summer solstice; when the Azure Dragon Seven Mansions hung high in the southern sky, they

regarded it as an auspicious "flying dragon in the sky" day. They adopted the dragon as totem, reinforcing connection through tattooing, artifact carving, and worship ceremonies. These symbols reflect existential anxiety facing natural disasters and longing for vitality and existence. (2) Qu Yuan drowned himself into the Miluo river Symbols center on the story and characters associated with his drowning, including Qu Yuan himself (symbol of patriotism), the Lord of the Clouds (mythical figure), and the Fisherman (contrasting life choice). Qu Yuan embodies a life-and-death view rooted in emotion and love - a synthesis of love for life, devotion to country, and appreciation for beauty. His dialogue with the Fisherman presents contrasting attitudes: steadfast adherence to ideals versus practical adaptation. The Lord of the Clouds represents longing for an idealized realm. These symbolic figures highlight Qu Yuan's unwavering commitment to convictions. (3) After Qu Yuan drowned himself into the Miluo river Symbols evolved around commemorating Qu Yuan, developing into contemporary customs including gathering herbs, wearing sachets, hanging mugwort and calamus, making zongzi, drinking realgar wine, dragon boat racing, and temple visits. As humans gained greater ability to harness nature, the relationship with dragon totems shifted from reverence to challenge. However, this evolution revealed that humanity's true adversary is often itself, and existence transcended mere survival toward pursuing meaningful life. Qu Yuan's spirit embodies the "greatness of man" in Chinese culture—a spiritual symbol of popular consciousness and literary tradition. Miluo people attributed all festival activities to commemorating Qu Yuan, completing the transition from dragon worship to Qu Yuan veneration.

6. DISCUSSIONS

This study identifies a dual structure of core and changing symbols within the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival culture, offering insights into how traditions endure and adapt. Core symbols provide cultural continuity, while changing symbols enable adaptation to new social contexts. Their interplay reveals a fundamental dynamic: core symbols anchor meaning, preventing cultural drift, while changing symbols keep tradition relevant. Qu Yuan's drowning marks a critical turning point in this symbolic evolution. Through Symbolic Interactionism, local communities actively reinterpreted existing dragon worship practices as commemorations of Qu Yuan, demonstrating that symbolic change is an agentic act of meaning-making by heritage bearers. This underscores local cultural consciousness in shaping tradition. Contemporary innovations reflect "tradition reconstruction." Integrating dragon boat racing with competitive sports, industrializing zongzi production, and incorporating contemporary design into festival products represent adaptations of changing symbols that preserve core meanings. These practices challenge the perceived dichotomy between authenticity and commercialization, suggesting they can coexist productively. The study further reveals a hierarchy of symbolic stability: material symbols are most mutable, behavioral symbols moderately stable, and spiritual symbols most enduring. This finding offers a practical framework for heritage preservation: prioritize safeguarding behavioral and spiritual dimensions while allowing material expressions greater flexibility for innovation.

Ultimately, the festival's vitality lies not in static preservation but in balancing core value continuity with expressive adaptation - a model with broader implications for understanding traditional culture in modernity.

7. ORIGINALITY AND BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

In summary, this paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of the historical evolution of the Dragon Boat Festival culture along the Miluo River, delving into the composition and representation of its cultural symbols and constructing a corresponding cultural symbol system. The study categorizes the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival culture into three distinct levels: material, behavioral, and spiritual, thereby revealing the stable core and dynamic evolutionary mechanisms across various historical stages. Core symbols, such as the festival period of the Dragon Boat Festival and its original purpose of warding off plagues and disasters, provide a steadfast foundation for the festival's culture, ensuring the continuity of its traditional values and historical lineage. Conversely, evolving symbols highlight the adaptability and diversity of the Dragon Boat Festival culture through different historical periods and social contexts, ranging from ancient dragon worship customs to the commemoration of Qu Yuan, and its modern integration with sports and tourism industries. These research findings not only offer a systematic framework for comprehending the rich connotations of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival culture but also provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture, holding substantial academic value and practical significance.

8. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implication of the Study

1. This study expands the understanding of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival by showing that its cultural symbolism is formed through the interaction between relatively stable core symbols and adaptive changing symbols. This helps explain how traditional festival culture maintains continuity while responding to contemporary social change.

2. The study also provides practical guidance for cultural preservation and innovation by suggesting that the spiritual connotations and ritual meanings of the festival should be protected as the cultural core, while material symbols and forms of expression may be appropriately transformed through education, tourism, design, and digital media.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future studies may compare the symbolic system of the Miluo River Dragon Boat Festival with Dragon Boat Festival traditions in other regions in order to identify both shared cultural patterns and local characteristics.

2. Future research may also adopt interdisciplinary approaches, such as semiotics, communication studies, design research, and digital humanities, to further explore how traditional festival symbols can be inherited, reconstructed, and disseminated in contemporary society.

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