

Sheep Wrestling Competition as Artifact: Bodily Practice and Educational Literacy in Modern China

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ABSTRACT

The sheep wrestling competition, deeply rooted in Xinzhou's multi-ethnic cultural integration and temple fair traditions, is an artifact of China's intangible cultural heritage, embodying rich historical, cultural, and social value. This traditional practice, characterized by its performative, competitive, and fitness-oriented nature, has evolved into a unique form of bodily practice and performing art. However, with rapid urbanization, the decline of rural populations, and the rise of modern entertainment, its cultural prominence has diminished, further exacerbated by insufficient mass communication and a lack of public literacy regarding its heritage value. This study explores the historical foundations, technical practices, and cultural significance of sheep wrestling, examining its dual role as both a performing art and an educational medium. The research highlights its potential to foster social identity and cultural literacy through a multidisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, performance theory, and a case study of the Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Festival. While findings reveal challenges such as inadequate theoretical exploration, declining intergenerational transmission, and limited engagement from younger generations, the study emphasizes the need for innovative inheritance strategies. These include integrating sheep wrestling into educational frameworks, enhancing its visibility through digital media, and modernizing its cultural presentation to align with contemporary societal values. By addressing these challenges, the study underscores the significance of sheep wrestling as a vital cultural artifact and proposes pathways for its sustainable preservation and broader educational impact.

Key words: Sheep Wrestling Competition, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Bodily Practice, Cultural Preservation, Educational Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The sheep wrestling competition is a unique cultural artifact deeply embedded in the traditions and social fabric of Xinzhou, Shanxi Province, China. As part of the region's long-standing folk culture, this competition is not merely a sport but a multifaceted cultural practice combining physical fitness, performance, and entertainment elements. Its origins can be traced back to ancient temple fairs and multi-ethnic cultural exchanges that shaped Xinzhou's identity, particularly as a historical frontier between nomadic and agrarian societies. Over centuries, the competition has evolved into a vivid spectacle, showcasing bodily practices' artistry and technical refinement while fostering community cohesion and cultural pride. Beyond its local roots, the sheep wrestling competition represents a broader narrative of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, encapsulating themes of resilience, tradition, and adaptation.

Despite its rich history and cultural significance, the sheep wrestling competition faces existential challenges in modern society (Jiao, 2009). The rapid pace of urbanization

and rural population decline has disrupted traditional modes of community-based inheritance as younger generations migrate to cities, leaving villages depopulated and cultural practices marginalized. The decline of temple fairs, historically the stage for such competitions, has further diminished the visibility of sheep wrestling as a communal activity. Additionally, the rise of modern entertainment options and the pressures of an exam-oriented education system have shifted societal focus away from traditional activities like wrestling. These changes have gradually eroded the practical skills associated with sheep wrestling and the public's awareness of its cultural value.

Compounding these challenges is the limited attention to sheep wrestling in academic research and mass communication. While scholars have acknowledged its performative and fitness-oriented nature, the lack of systematic theoretical exploration has hindered a deeper understanding of its historical and cultural dimensions. Similarly, media coverage often must highlight the competition's entertainment value and cultural significance, restricting its appeal to broader

audiences. As traditional methods of skill transmission, such as family inheritance and community mentorship, become less viable, there is an urgent need to explore innovative approaches to preserving and promoting the sheep wrestling competition (Hauser, 2013).

This study positions the sheep wrestling competition as a cultural artifact that not only represents the historical and social identity of Xinzhou but also holds potential as a tool for educational literacy in contemporary society. By examining its evolution, performative elements, and modern adaptations, the research seeks to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. Viewing sheep wrestling through the lens of bodily practice highlights its role in fostering physical education and cultural awareness, offering new avenues for integration into modern cultural and educational frameworks. The Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Festival is a focal point for this analysis, providing a case study to understand the competition's impact on community identity, audience engagement, and regional pride.

Through a multidisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, performance theory, and cultural studies, this research aims to uncover the enduring significance of the sheep wrestling competition. The study investigates strategies for innovative inheritance, such as integrating digital media, modernizing presentation formats, and incorporating sheep wrestling into physical education curricula. These efforts are crucial for preserving the tradition and ensuring its relevance in a rapidly changing society. By framing the sheep wrestling competition as a dynamic cultural practice with educational and social value, this study contributes to broader discussions on preserving intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization and modernization (Li, 2017).

In essence, the sheep wrestling competition is more than a historical relic; it is a living tradition that embodies the intersection of performance, physicality, and community. Its survival and revitalization depend on adapting to contemporary contexts while maintaining its cultural essence. This research seeks to offer meaningful insights and practical solutions to sustain this ancient practice, ensuring that it continues to inspire and educate future generations while remaining a vibrant symbol of diverse cultural heritage.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This research delves into the cultural and historical significance of the sheep wrestling competition in Xinzhou, Shanxi Province, as a vital element of China's intangible cultural heritage. It explores the competition's origins in temple fairs and multi-ethnic traditions, tracing its evolution from a community-based activity into a performative and competitive practice. The study examines its bodily practices, including physical techniques, expressive movements, and audience interactions, to uncover its deeper cultural, social, and artistic dimensions. Additionally, the research highlights the role of sheep wrestling in fostering educational literacy, emphasizing its potential to promote cultural awareness, community identity, and physical education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the sheep wrestling competition as a cultural artifact, focusing on its historical evolution, bodily practices, and educational significance. The following research methods are utilized:

Literature Research Method

Historical documents, including local chronicles, folklore, and archival materials, are collected, sorted, and analyzed to trace the sheep wrestling competition's origin, development, and evolution. This analysis provides a foundational understanding of its cultural and historical context.

Existing academic studies on sheep wrestling are reviewed to identify research gaps and opportunities for innovation. This analysis helps frame the study within broader discussions of intangible cultural heritage and performing arts.

Participant Observation Method

Fieldwork is conducted in areas where sheep wrestling traditions are preserved, such as the Xinzhou Sports School Wrestling Hall and Dingxiang Temple Fairs. Observations focus on activity processes, competition rules, participant behavior, and audience interaction, providing first-hand insights into the cultural and performative aspects of the competition.

The researchers actively participate as coaches, leading a team in regional sheep wrestling events. This immersive approach offers a participant's perspective on the competition's bodily practices, social significance, and organizational dynamics.

Interview Method

Discussions are held with referees, cultural experts, and veteran performers, such as Jia Junfeng, a national Chinese wrestling referee, to explore the competition's technical, safety, and cultural aspects. Interviews with intangible cultural heritage inheritors like Zhang Shunliang and Zhu Yanqing delve into their learning processes and perspectives on preserving sheep wrestling.

Interviews with spectators and participants capture diverse perspectives on the competition's appeal, cultural relevance, and expectations. Questions also explore their emotional and cultural connections to the event.

Village organizers and educators, such as Wang Zhikuan, head of training at the Xinzhou Sports School, are interviewed to understand how sheep wrestling is integrated into educational curricula and its impact on student engagement and cultural preservation.

Documentary Analysis

Documents from local and national archives, government reports, and sports institutions are examined to contextualize the sheep wrestling competition within broader cultural

and institutional frameworks. These sources provide insights into how the tradition has been formalized and adapted.

RESULTS

The Historical Development of the Sheep Wrestling Competition

The historical development of the sheep wrestling competition reveals a fascinating evolution from a localized folk tradition to a prominent cultural symbol recognized at the national level. Deeply rooted in the traditions of Xinzhou, Shanxi Province, this ancient practice originated in communal rituals, agricultural festivities, and seasonal celebrations. Its historical journey is a testament to its adaptability and resilience, reflecting the region's cultural identity and collective spirit. Combining physical competition with social customs and artistic expression, the sheep wrestling competition has maintained its relevance and significance across centuries, bridging tradition and modernity. This progression demonstrates the dynamic nature of cultural practices and their ability to thrive amid evolving societal context (Duan, 2023).

Throughout its history, the sheep wrestling competition has continuously transformed, influenced by different eras' cultural and historical shifts. In ancient times, it functioned as both a ritualistic practice and a form of physical training, blending elements of strength, endurance, and spirituality. It held significant social and religious value as a part of temple sacrifices and communal gatherings. During the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties, the competition expanded as a celebrated folk event, incorporating local dialects, music, and storytelling, enhancing its cultural richness. This era saw sheep wrestling as a test of skill and strength and a medium of cultural transmission, showcasing the region's unique identity and artistic flair (Jiao, 2009). By the modern period, the competition had evolved into a structured and formalized sport, embracing innovations that preserved its traditional core while aligning it with contemporary expectations.

The establishment of the Xinzhou City Wrestling Club in 2003 marked a pivotal moment in the formalization and promotion of the sheep wrestling competition (Figure 1). As a cultural institution, the club played a central role in institutionalizing the sport, organizing large-scale events such as the "Three Realms Xinzhou Wrestling Festival" and establishing the Wrestling Museum in 2004. The museum serves as a repository of historical artifacts, cultural relics, and documentation, offering valuable insights into the heritage of sheep wrestling for researchers and enthusiasts alike. These efforts culminated in recognizing the sheep wrestling competition as a provincial intangible cultural heritage in 2006 and its inclusion in the "National Intangible Cultural Heritage List" in 2008. Such milestones highlight the significance of institutional support in safeguarding and elevating cultural traditions, ensuring their survival and growth in a rapidly changing world.

The development and preservation of the sheep wrestling competition have been significantly influenced by the contributions of critical families and individual inheritors

who have acted as custodians of this tradition (Figure 2). The Cui family from Nan Gao Village is a notable example, with successive generations producing champions and preserving authentic techniques. The family's legacy includes figures like Cui Fuhai, a national champion and inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, and Cui Shuhe, who has contributed internationally to the sport. Similarly, influential coaches like Zhang Shunliang and Zhu Yanqing have played critical roles in nurturing talent, modernizing training methods, and promoting the sport to broader audiences. Their efforts underscore the importance of inter-generational transmission and community engagement in maintaining the authenticity and vitality of cultural heritage (Li & Mao, 2014).

As the sheep wrestling competition has integrated into contemporary society, it has emerged as a symbol of regional and national cultural identity, representing the unique heritage of Xinzhou while resonating with broader audiences. Its inclusion in large-scale cultural and sporting events has broadened its appeal, attracting participants and spectators nationwide. Notably, the 2003 Wrestling Festival, which involved 1,300 athletes and attracted nearly 100,000 spectators, exemplifies the sport's growing influence. In addition to fostering public interest and participation, the competition has contributed to the growth of sports tourism and cultural



Figure 1. The battle of strength and the confrontation of wisdom

Source. Photographed by Wang Haoyu



Figure 2. The sculpture in Xinzhou City Wrestling Club

Source. Photographed by the author, 2023

industries, driving economic development in the region. Its performative and aesthetic aspects have also inspired contemporary artistic expressions, bridging the gap between traditional culture and modern creative practices.

Despite its achievements, the sheep wrestling competition faces challenges in balancing traditional authenticity with the demands of modernization. Preserving its original essence while adapting to the preferences of contemporary audiences requires careful innovation and thoughtful management. Engaging younger generations remains critical to ensuring the sport's sustainability, necessitating efforts to make it more accessible and appealing through educational programs, interactive events, and modern media. However, these challenges also present opportunities to reimagine the sport's format and expand its influence. Incorporating digital storytelling, gamified experiences, and cross-cultural collaborations could attract new audiences and enhance its global appeal (Li & Zhao, 2019).

The historical development of the sheep wrestling competition illustrates its remarkable journey from a folk activity rooted in local customs to a nationally celebrated cultural heritage. Its evolution reflects the interplay of historical contexts, community participation, family transmission, and institutional support, which have sustained its relevance and vitality (Wu & Fan, 2013). As a living cultural artifact, the competition continues to adapt to the demands of contemporary society, promoting cultural pride, fostering community cohesion, and contributing to preserving China's intangible cultural heritage. By balancing tradition and innovation, the sheep wrestling competition serves as a model for the sustainable development of cultural practices, ensuring their continued resonance and significance in a globalized world.

Bodily Practice of Modern Sheep Wrestling Competition

This research explores the evolution of the sheep wrestling competition, a traditional sport once focused primarily on physical strength and endurance, into a modern art form that integrates emotional expression, improvisation, and cultural heritage. Traditionally, the emphasis was placed on the athletes' ability to dominate their opponents through brute strength, speed, and technical skill, with little regard for the expressive potential of their bodily movements. However, with the growing influence of modern performing arts, the perception of the body in sheep wrestling has undergone a significant transformation. It is now seen as a tool for competition and a medium for storytelling and emotional communication. Athletes increasingly utilize body language to convey emotions such as determination, respect, and triumph, transforming the competitive arena into a stage where personal narratives and cultural traditions unfold for the audience (Li & Zhao, 2019).

The integration of artistic principles has fundamentally altered the physical practices of athletes in sheep wrestling. Movements that were once solely utilitarian have been reimagined to emphasize precision, fluidity, and harmony. Techniques such as throws, rotations, and defensive maneuvers are now executed with greater control and elegance,

blending physical power with aesthetic appeal. Athletes also engage with the spatial dynamics of the competition venue, utilizing different levels and areas of the ring to craft visually engaging performances (Li, 2017). This interaction with space enhances the competition's strategic complexity and provides the audience with a richer visual and emotional experience. These artistic refinements elevate the competition beyond its original purpose, transforming it into a cultural performance that celebrates individual skill and collective heritage.

The training regimens for sheep wrestling have also evolved to align with these new artistic demands. Traditional physical and technical training is now complemented by practices drawn from dance and other performing arts, which enhance athletes' coordination, expressiveness, and creativity. This multidisciplinary approach enables athletes to combine technical precision and artistic expression seamlessly. Such training fosters a deeper understanding of the body as a versatile instrument capable of physical dominance and creative communication (Figure 3). Athletes are now encouraged to develop a holistic skill set that includes strength and agility and the ability to convey emotions and connect with their audience through movement. This adaptation underscores the transformation of sheep wrestling into a comprehensive art form that transcends the traditional boundaries of competitive sport (Duan, 2023).

Inspired by modern performing arts, the influence of improvisation and creativity has introduced a new layer of adaptability and innovation into sheep wrestling. Athletes no longer rely solely on preplanned techniques but instead respond dynamically to their opponent's movements and the flow of the match (Figure 4). This improvisational approach requires athletes to demonstrate exceptional on-the-spot decision-making, body control, and innovative thinking. It allows for creating novel and imaginative techniques that reflect the athletes' personalities and styles. The unpredictability introduced by improvisation not only tests the athletes' creativity but also enhances the excitement and engagement of the audience. The inability to predict the outcome of the competition adds suspense, making each match a unique and thrilling experience.

Integrating artistic and cultural elements further enriches the sheep wrestling competition, enhancing its aesthetic and cultural dimensions. The competition adopts a

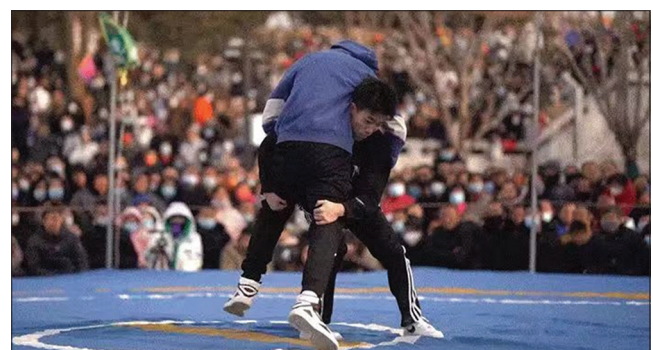


Figure 3. The leg-hugging technique in the competition
Source. Photographed by the author, 2024



Figure 4. The single cell leg technology in the competition Source. Photographed by the author, 2024



Figure 5. The competition performance stage Source. Photographed by the author, 2023

more theatrical and immersive quality by incorporating lighting, music, and choreographed movements. These modern enhancements complement the traditional values of sheep wrestling, such as the celebration of strength, skill, and perseverance, ensuring the preservation of its cultural heritage while appealing to contemporary audiences (Figure 5). The competition thus becomes a bridge between the past and the present, honoring longstanding traditions while embracing innovation. Athletes' movements reflect their technical mastery and cultural roots, creating a performance that resonates deeply with local and global audiences (Zhang et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the sheep wrestling competition has evolved into a multidimensional art form that combines physical prowess, emotional expression, and cultural significance. Athletes have embraced their movements' expressive and narrative potential, using their bodies to connect with audiences in profound and meaningful ways. This transformation exemplifies the successful integration of tradition and innovation, preserving the cultural roots of the competition while enriching its artistic and emotional resonance. By incorporating elements of modern performing arts, improvisation, and cross-disciplinary training, sheep wrestling has become a platform for individual expression and collective cultural celebration. This modern adaptation ensures the competition's continued relevance and appreciation. It fosters a cultural and artistic excellence legacy for future generations while inviting more audiences to engage with and participate in its unique charm.

Taking Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Competition Festival as the Unit of Analysis

The Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Competition Festival embodies a distinctive integration of physical performance and artistic expression, serving as a dynamic platform for cultural innovation. This research underscores the festival's capacity to transform the physicality of wrestling into a visual and emotional art form. The wrestlers' movements—characterized by their fluid rhythm, coordinated execution, and expressive gestures—elevate the sport to an artistic phenomenon, captivating spectators and participants. Complemented by the vibrant display of colorful flags, dramatic lighting, and comprehensive media coverage, the event creates a compelling stage-like atmosphere. Furthermore, the festival inspires a range of creative outputs across artistic disciplines such as painting, sculpture, paper cutting, and photography, providing a rich source of material for artists to explore the dynamic interplay of strength, rhythm, and emotion (Li & Mao, 2014).

In a social context, the festival reinforces the cultural identity and cohesion of the Xinzhou community, serving as both a repository and a bridge for local traditions. By maintaining and showcasing the region's unique cultural heritage, the event strengthens a shared sense of belonging among community members while fostering collective pride. The emphasis on traditional values, such as honesty, friendship, and fair competition, fosters unity and mutual respect within the community. Moreover, the festival's inclusive structure engages younger generations, providing opportunities for skill development, leadership, and cultural education. This participation ensures the sustainability of the sport and its traditions, cultivating a reserve of future talent and ambassadors of the community's cultural legacy.

As an intangible cultural heritage, the festival encapsulates the historical, social, and artistic identity of Xinzhou. Wrestling, as a form of cultural expression, reflects the local population's wisdom, resilience, and aspirations, bridging their historical past with contemporary practices (Zhang et al., 2017). The festival's capacity to attract visitors enhances its function as a cultural exchange and economic growth medium. By boosting tourism and promoting the sale of local crafts, such as ink stones, the event contributes significantly to the regional economy while simultaneously presenting Xinzhou's traditions to a broader audience. Through these interactions, the festival fosters a dialogue between insiders and outsiders, reinforcing the importance of preserving cultural heritage while encouraging mutual appreciation and exchange.

Looking ahead, the Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Competition Festival holds considerable potential for innovation while maintaining its traditional roots. Integrating modern technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, can offer immersive experiences for audiences, broadening its appeal and accessibility. Interdisciplinary collaborations with other art forms, such as theater, dance, and digital media, can further enrich its artistic expression. Additionally, adopting sustainable event management practices aligns the festival with global values, enhancing its modern relevance.

As a synthesis of art, tradition, and community spirit, the Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Competition Festival not only preserves and promotes local cultural heritage but also exemplifies the transformative power of traditional practices in contemporary society.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the profound cultural, historical, and social significance of the sheep wrestling competition as both a traditional folk activity and a dynamic cultural artifact, highlighting its potential to adapt and thrive in contemporary contexts. Despite facing challenges such as urbanization, demographic shifts, and declining intergenerational transmission, the competition holds immense value as a medium for cultural preservation and education. Artistic reinterpretations, such as transforming its techniques into staged performances and technological advancements like virtual reality and motion capture, offer innovative pathways to enhance audience engagement and ensure its relevance for younger generations. Integrating sheep wrestling into educational frameworks further underscores its role in fostering cultural literacy and social cohesion, while media platforms and cultural exchanges amplify its visibility and global resonance. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical analysis, performance theory, and technological innovation, this research underscores the enduring vitality of the sheep wrestling competition. It proposes sustainable strategies to preserve and promote it as a symbol of cultural resilience and creativity.

CONCLUSION

The sheep wrestling competition, deeply rooted in Xinzhou's multi-ethnic cultural integration and temple fair traditions, is an artifact of China's intangible cultural heritage, embodying rich historical, cultural, and social value. This traditional practice, characterized by its performative, competitive, and fitness-oriented nature, has evolved into a unique form of bodily practice and performing art. However, with rapid urbanization, the decline of rural populations, and the rise of modern entertainment, its cultural prominence has diminished, further exacerbated by insufficient mass communication and a lack of public literacy regarding its heritage value. This study explores the historical foundations, technical practices, and cultural significance of sheep wrestling, examining its dual role as both a performing art and an educational medium. The research highlights its potential to foster social identity and cultural literacy through a multidisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, performance theory, and a Xinzhou Sheep Wrestling Festival case study. While findings reveal challenges such as inadequate theoretical

exploration, declining intergenerational transmission, and limited engagement from younger generations, the study emphasizes the need for innovative inheritance strategies. These include integrating sheep wrestling into educational frameworks, enhancing its visibility through digital media, and modernizing its cultural presentation to align with contemporary societal values. By addressing these challenges, the study underscores the significance of sheep wrestling as a vital cultural artifact and proposes pathways for its sustainable preservation and broader educational impact.

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