
Identity and Value of Fuxi Worship Ritual: Preservation and Inheritance of Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

The Fuxi worship ritual, Hebei Province, is one of the oldest and most symbolic sacrificial traditions in Chinese civilization. It celebrates the mythical cultural hero and ancestor of humanity, Fuxi. The ritual originated from tribal sacrifices and was passed down through the royal family, government, and folk until it was listed as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2011. However, with modernization, globalization, and the gradual decline of folk beliefs, cultural heritage faces significant challenges to its inheritance and sustainable development. This study employs qualitative and interdisciplinary methods, combining cultural heritage theory, performing arts analysis, and ethnographic field research to conduct an in-depth examination of the structure, function, and symbolic meaning of the contemporary Fuxi worship ritual. Through a systematic analysis of ritual processes, spatial symbols, music and dance elements, and local participation mechanisms, the study found that the festival serves as an important tool for maintaining cultural identity, facilitating intergenerational inheritance, and promoting social and cultural integration. To achieve the contemporary expression and living inheritance of the cultural value of the Fuxi worship ritual, this study emphasizes the need to develop a multifaceted protection model that incorporates government leadership, folk participation, and tourism innovation. This study not only provides theoretical support for the sustainable preservation of China's intangible cultural heritage but also offers practical guidance for the protection of endangered sacrificial rituals.

Keywords: Fuxi Worship Ritual, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Identity, Ritual Performance, Heritage Preservation

1. Introduction

Fuxi is regarded as the cultural ancestor and the first mythical emperor of Chinese civilization, and he had a significant impact on the development of China's early social system, religious activities, and cosmology. Fuxi worship ritual is held in Xinle City, Hebei Province, to commemorate the birthday of Fuxi. It is a cultural event with a long history. The ceremony was

first held in the Shi Qi Dynasty but was later formalized by Emperor Ku (Jia, 2018). It contains mythology, politics, and spirituality.

Xinle Fuxi worship is a means for the Chinese nation to express its national identity, inherit its culture, and commemorate its history (Yang, *n.d.*). It not only praises the outstanding achievements of this sage king, such as the invention of the Eight Trigrams, the establishment of marriage customs, and the promotion of agriculture.

Fuxi worship ritual have a long history and have been listed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List since 2011 (Jia, 2018). However, due to urbanization, intergenerational isolation, and lack of integration with modern media, its protection and inheritance face severe challenges. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines anthropological observation, performance analysis, and cultural heritage theory, this study aims to examine the evolving structure, significance of identity, and cultural value of Fuxi worship rituals. By examining official and folk ritual practices, spatial symbolism, ritual aesthetics, and local participatory processes, this study aims to illuminate the role of Fuxi worship rituals as a continuous channel for cultural resilience and local revitalization. The purpose of this study is to help us understand how intangible heritage practices function as dynamic systems to adapt to modern social, political, and economic transformations. By highlighting the connection between tradition and modernity, this study provides a critical perspective on how rituals preserve collective memory and promote cultural identity and community sustainability. In addition, this paper discusses the preservation of tourism strategies and heritage values to ensure the continuity of rituals in line with national cultural development goals and global heritage discourses.

2. Research Objective

This study seeks to investigate the cultural development, ritual practices, and heritage transmission of the Fuxi worship ritual in Xinle, Hebei Province. The specific objectives are:

1. To explore the historical evolution and contemporary transformation of Fuxi culture, with a focus on how cultural identity has been constructed, symbolized, and localized in Xinle.
2. To examine the current status, ritual procedures, performance elements, and challenges of the Fuxi worship ritual, including issues of cultural participation, generational continuity, and ritual authenticity.
3. To propose a practical framework for the preservation and transmission of Fuxi cultural heritage, integrating public policy, community participation, cultural tourism, and educational strategies.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in interpretive cultural analysis. It integrates ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, textual analysis, and case study approaches to explore the identity construction, ritual performance, and heritage transmission of the Fuxi worship ritual in Xinle.

3.1. Ethnographic Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted from April 2023 to April 2024, focusing on Fuxi Temple, Fuxi Cultural Square, and surrounding village communities. Ritual activities during the Fuxi Worship Festival were meticulously observed and documented, encompassing both official and folk ceremonies.

3.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with local officials, cultural workers, temple administrators, folk artists, elderly residents, and tourists. A total of 25 participants were interviewed to understand their perceptions of the ritual, participation experience, and views on cultural identity and preservation.

3.3. Participatory Observation

The researcher actively participated in festival events and folk performances, documenting ritual music, costumes, movement sequences, and audience engagement.

3.4. Textual and Visual Analysis

Official documents, festival programs, local gazetteers, and visual materials, including posters, video recordings, and photographs, were analyzed to identify symbolic elements and historical continuities in the ritual.

3.5. Case Study Approach

The study treats the Xinle Fuxi worship as a representative case of intangible heritage in Northern China, enabling cross-comparative insights with other ritual traditions such as Tianshui and Huaiyang.

Through triangulating these data sources, the study constructs a holistic understanding of the Fuxi ritual's cultural meaning, identity function, and transmission challenges in the modern era.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates ritual theory, cultural identity construction, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). These perspectives provide the conceptual tools to understand the Fuxi worship ritual not merely as a historical performance but as a living cultural practice situated at the intersection of memory, belief, and social structure.

4.1. Ritual Theory

Drawing on the work of Victor Turner (1969), ritual is viewed as a performative and symbolic act that mediates transitions, constructs meaning and sustains collective identity. Turner's concepts of communities and liminality are beneficial for analyzing the transformative nature of the Fuxi worship ritual, where participants engage in a structured sequence of sacred acts that momentarily suspend every day and reaffirm social bonds.

4.2. Cultural Identity and Symbolic Anthropology

Clifford Geertz (1973) provide key insights into how culture functions as a system of meaning and identity construction. The Fuxi ritual is interpreted as a site where narratives of ancestry, nationhood, and local belonging are articulated and reaffirmed. Symbolic elements—such as the Eight Trigrams, dragon imagery, and ritual music—serve as cultural codes that reinforce a shared sense of Chineseness and community heritage.

4.3. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Framework

National and international policy frameworks have influenced the institutionalization of the Fuxi ritual. While the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) provides a basis for the global recognition and protection of living cultural practices, Chinese national policies, such as State Council directives and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law, translate these principles into specific classification, protection, and promotion procedures. To achieve national recognition of the Fuxi ritual as a cultural heritage, these policies incorporate it into the heritage management system and link it to broader cultural governance and national identity construction programs.

Scholars such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) have critiqued the transformation of living culture into "heritage displays," raising concerns about authenticity, musicalization, and the performance of culture for tourism. This study engages with such debates by assessing the balance between preservation and reinvention in the Fuxi ritual context.

Through the integration of these theoretical strands, the Fuxi worship ritual is analyzed not only as a ceremonial tradition but also as a dynamic cultural form that reflects ongoing negotiations between past and present, state and community, and sacred and secular. The framework supports a critical interpretation of how heritage is performed, contested, and transmitted within contemporary Chinese society.

5. Findings

5.1. Historical Origins and Cultural Background of the Xinle Fuxi Worship Ritual

The worship of Fuxi in Xinle, Hebei Province, is regarded as one of the oldest and most culturally significant sacrificial practices in Chinese civilization. According to oral tradition and historical sources, the origins of the ritual can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, when tribal societies began to worship ancestral spirits and natural forces. Over thousands of years, the ritual of worshipping Fuxi evolved from an initial shamanistic practice to a formal system of ancestral worship, reflecting the transformation of royal power, local government, and folk beliefs.

To institutionalize and establish a routine for the royal family to participate in ancestral worship, Emperor Taizong of Tang designated March 3 and September 9 as days for worshipping the "Three Emperors" (including Fuxi). During the Song Dynasty, Empress Dowager Du of Xinle (Tang Taizu's mother) often went to Fuxi Terrace for personal and symbolic worship. Emperor Chengzong issued a decree during the Yuan Dynasty stipulating the worship of sages such as Fuxi and supervising the restoration of the temple. During the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang expanded the list of worshippers to include seventeen historical emperors, including Fuxi. During the Qing Dynasty, Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong both personally presided over or led pilgrimages to Fuxi Terrace, indicating that the emperors highly regarded the site.

Located in Hejiazhuang Village, northeast of Xinle City, Fuxi Terrace is a two-story platform built with rammed earth and bricks. Its base is octagonal, representing the Eight Trigrams. Archaeological discoveries around the site reveal multiple layers of cultural deposits dating back to the Shang, Zhou, Warring States, and Han dynasties. Pottery, tiles, and daily utensils are part of it. This information proves the long history of sacrificial activities at the site and its cultural importance.

The worship activities have survived dynasties but were severely damaged during the Cultural Revolution, and many religious and cultural buildings, including the Fuxi Temple, were destroyed. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, the joint efforts of local governments, scholars, and non-governmental organizations led to the revival of Fuxi worship. In 1995, the Xinle Municipal Government officially resumed public worship of Fuxi. The ceremony was listed as a provincial intangible cultural heritage in 2009 and received national recognition in 2011.

Xinle Fuxi worship ritual now include both folk-led rituals (such as welcoming the gods, offering tributes, and performing drum dances) and government-supported public rituals (Figure 1). Both forms of ritual feature traditional music, sacrificial texts, and extensive public participation. The ritual is not only a religious and cultural activity but also a platform for academic exchange, heritage tourism, and the formation of cultural identity for both residents and overseas Chinese.



Figure 1. Xinle worship ritual, 2024

(Source: Reproduced from Hebei Radio and Television Station.)

While preserving the core narrative of Fuxi as the creator of civilization, this complex and multi-layered historical development illustrates how rituals have continually adapted to political shifts, social transformations, and modern cultural needs.

5.2. *The Current Situation and Problems of the Fuxi Worship Ritual*

Today, the Fuxi worship ritual has been redefined as a cultural symbol and community festival. Every year, around the 18th day of the third lunar month, many people gather at Fuxi Terrace (Figure 2), where officials and residents participate in elaborate rituals. At the beginning of the ceremony, drums beat in the cultural square, smoke billows from tall incense burners, and ceremonial officials dressed in ancient costumes march past the altar. To worship the "first ancestor Fuxi," designated worshippers recite sacrificial texts and perform traditional music and dance. People place huge flower baskets. However, behind the grand ceremony, there are increasing conflicts and problems that affect the authenticity, sustainability, and legacy of the ceremony. Due to a lack of technical knowledge and original materials, many ritual procedures have been simplified in recent years. Today, some once solemn and grand rituals, such as praying to the gods, performing ritual dance steps based on ancient cosmology, or preparing symbolic food offerings, are more akin to showcasing culture to tourists and cameras than to continuing sacred rituals. The traditional balance between awe and performance is increasingly tilted towards drama. Folk customs like the Nuo dance, once used to ward off evil spirits and protect the earth, are now often reduced to broken spectacles, performed with modern lighting and sound systems and divorced from their original ritual meaning.

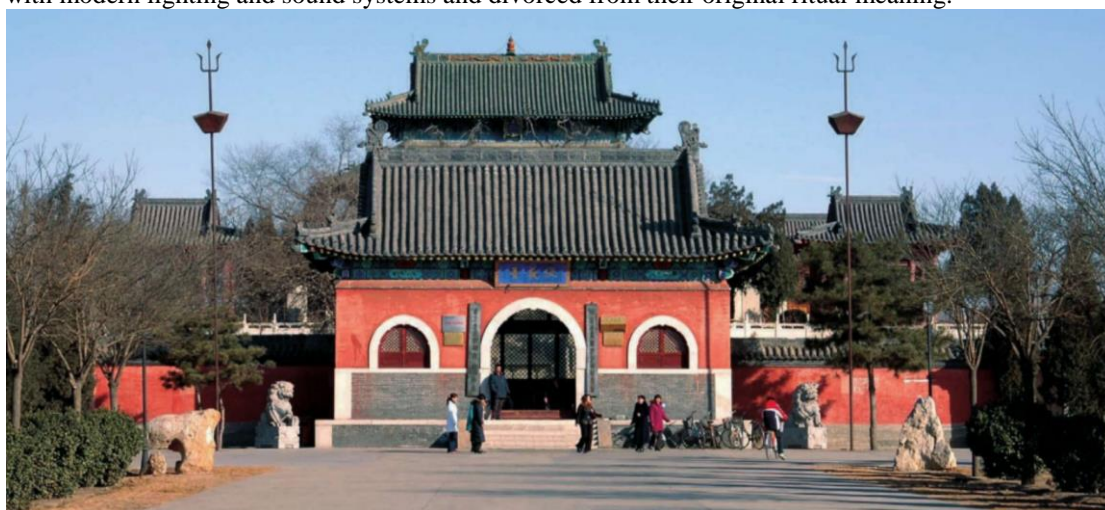


Figure 2. The exterior view of Fuxi Terrace

(Source: Reproduced from <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1833003395433240027&wfr=spider&for=pc>)

The transmission of ritual knowledge is becoming increasingly complex. Community elders have aged and are no longer able to continue to record every step of the ritual process. Interviews with local performers and residents reveal that young people are often unfamiliar with the meaning of specific rituals and are even less inclined to participate actively in subsequent rituals. In some cases, villagers participate as spectators rather than as co-creators of ritual meaning. This reflects a broader shift away from deeply rooted traditions and toward detached observation. This generational divide affects not only interest but also training. Few formal programs teach young people the subtle differences in sacred music performance, costume making, or ritual choreography.

This intergenerational disconnect can be further explained by Victor Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "community," which are crucial to understanding the transformative power of ritual. Fuxi rituals traditionally provide a "liminal space" that

allows participants—especially young people—to temporarily break away from their daily roles and participate in symbolic activities, thereby enhancing social cohesion. However, as younger generations increasingly become ritual participants rather than passive observers, this “liminal space” has gradually lost its ability to promote change. The demise of “community,” or the profound sense of equality that emerges from shared ritual experiences suggests a general weakening of the integrative function of ritual. Instead of promoting emotional solidarity and the renewal of symbolic meaning, rituals risk becoming a stage performance consumed for tourism or appreciation of cultural heritage, disconnected from their original social and spiritual meanings. This shift highlights the urgent need to reimagine modes of communication that can revitalize participatory experiences and reinvigorate the experiential core of rituals for young participants.

Furthermore, infrastructure and environmental constraints restrict the performance of the ritual. The main structure of Fuxi Terrace has been partially restored, but many secondary buildings – such as the Leigong Temple and related shrines – remain unbuilt, which limits the full implementation of the ritual across the entire spatial scope. The ritual process has been disrupted by the loss of the original architectural structure, and some sacrifices must now be performed in makeshift tents or platforms erected in the open air. In addition, some historically significant sacrificial tools, such as jade, bronze tripods, and ritual vessels, have either been lost or replaced with plastic imitations, which undermines the material composition of the ritual. Spectators and tourists are sometimes confused or disappointed by the mismatch between the historical story and the modern presentation.

The geographical location of the ritual adds a challenge. Fuxi Terrace is located on a plain outside the village of Hejiazhuang, about 35 kilometers from Shijiazhuang, with no direct traffic. During the peak festival period, limited infrastructure results in traffic jams, delays, and inconvenience, forcing many participants to rent private cars or taxis. Visitors unfamiliar with the area are often deterred by the inconvenience, which has a knock-on effect on the participation of residents and the effectiveness of tourism-based conservation strategies.

The quiet disappearance of the faith may be the most pressing issue. For centuries, the Fuxi worship was not only a performance but also an important exchange of ideas that enabled villagers to connect with their ancestors and the power of heaven and earth. Today, this significance is obscured by commercial banners, media coverage, and grand celebrations. Young people may enjoy the event, but they may lack the cultural knowledge to understand the symbolic words in each movement, offering, or chanting. Local temple staff have found that fewer families come with explicit prayers or wishes, and more people just come to “take pictures” or “watch the show.” Although the sacred object still exists, it is often unintentionally redefined as traditional entertainment.

Conflicts and disputes mark the current situation surrounding Fuxi worship. The worship does have public and institutional support, but its internal structure and cultural vitality face subtle and ongoing challenges. Without new strategies for education, participation, and spatial revitalization, the form of the Fuxi worship may continue to exist, but its meaning may gradually fade away. This means that the gap between traditional practice and modern performance is widening.

5.3. Guidelines for the Protection and Transmission of Fuxi Cultural Heritage

With a top-down policy framework and bottom-up community engagement, Xinle City has made significant progress in protecting and passing on Fuxi cultural heritage over the past two decades. Since the restoration of the Fuxi worship ritual in 1995, the local government has viewed it as a cultural foundation for the city's identity and tourism plans. To support the annual festival, the municipality has invested funds in restoring the Fuxi Temple complex, building the Fuxi Cultural Square, and constructing infrastructure. Xinle City established a local heritage protection center by the 2005 “Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage” and the 2011 “Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage”. The center is responsible for managing archives, providing educational programs, and collaborating with local cultural institutions.

Nevertheless, legal or institutional protection is only part of a broader cultural environment. Xinle's folk associations, village committees, and temple fair groups led by elders play a role in the daily transmission of ritual knowledge. Field research has found that some of the most effective transmission occurs in families, schools, and family workshops rather than in official venues. For example, in preparation for the annual festival, older women gather to make traditional sacrificial foods such as oil cakes and rice dumplings, while children learn to make incense or origami lotus flowers. These customs are rarely formally recorded in official manuals, but they are a living legacy of rituals that are deeply rooted and passed down through generations.

Using cultural festivals and creative reinterpretations to attract young audiences is another important aspect. Since 2023, Xinle City has been working to integrate the Fuxi worship ritual with other forms of cultural expression, including concerts, youth theater, and academic seminars. A striking example is the “Fuxi + Rock” event, which follows the daytime ritual performance with a nighttime rock concert in the same square, attracting thousands of young people and helping to reshape the ritual space as both sacred and socially meaningful. Although this integration has raised concerns about the purity of the ritual, it also demonstrates a desire to find adaptive models that align with modern aesthetic and experiential expectations.

Education is also becoming increasingly important. Schools in Xinle City, with the support of the Municipal Education Bureau, have carried out a series of curriculum activities during the Fuxi worship ritual. Students are invited to the Fuxi Temple, where they can interview performers and recreate simplified versions of traditional rituals in class. Storytelling competitions and poster design competitions based on themes of Fuxi's mythological contributions (such as inventing the Eight Diagrams or encouraging adult marriage) provide children with opportunities to explore cultural heritage. These forms may not have the rigor of ritual, but they help to create a symbolic sense of familiarity and emotional attachment.

Cultural planners in Xinle have begun promoting the “Fuxi Cultural Corridor” as a regional development goal. The project aims to integrate creative industries, eco-zones, and sacrificial sites into a unified branding strategy. In collaboration with

institutions such as the Hebei Academy of Fine Arts, themed products, animated stories, and public art installations centered on the Fuxi myth have been produced. These collaborations help bridge the gap between traditional content and modern forms, making cultural heritage more visible in everyday life.

However, problems remain. Although government grants have supported large-scale festivals and temple restorations, long-term community training, documentation, and field research are still lacking. Many local cultural relic protectors still engage in voluntary work, but they rarely receive recognition or financial support. Additionally, due to the lack of an organized mentorship system, much ritual expertise is easily lost upon retirement or the death of the practitioner. The heritage system has not yet fully institutionalized oral, performative, and emotional knowledge despite increasing visibility.

The example of Xinle demonstrates that the future of Fuxi cultural heritage lies not only in protecting sites or hosting celebrations but also in building connections between the government and the public, elders and youth, tradition and creativity. Successful inheritance is not just about preservation; participation, trust, and a shared sense of purpose are also necessary. Therefore, protecting rituals is an ongoing social discussion rather than a clear goal.

6. Discussion

The revival of the Fuxi worship ritual in Xinle provides a fascinating example that can help us analyze the influence inherent in contemporary cultural heritage practices in China. As a ritual deeply rooted in mythological symbols and real social identities, Fuxi worship has undergone many historical changes. It was initially a sacrificial ritual and royal celebration, but in modern times, it has evolved to incorporate folk traditions, cultural performances, and state-led heritage branding. This change raises a significant question: What is the meaning of "protecting" intangible cultural heritage in the context of rapid development and changing sociopolitical values?

According to performance theory (Schechner, 2002) and ritual as symbolic behavior (Turner, 1969), the purpose of the Fuxi worship ritual is not just a reenactment of historical forms; it also constitutes a changing cultural system that manages memory, identity, and authority. The ritual space centered on Fuxi Terrace not only hosts material sacrificial activities but also serves as a platform for contesting tradition. The ritual is not only a tribute to ancestors but also a public narrative of cultural legitimacy, political ideology, and local pride.

This performativity also has costs. According to the research, many parts of ritual have been reshaped or lost due to logistical, generational, and ideological factors. What Clifford Geertz (1973) referred to as the "deep performance" of ritual is being weakened, and layers of cultural meaning are being reduced to surface displays. In addition, the simplification of rituals has led to the replacement of sacred actions with aesthetically performed acts. The problem of cultural "museumization" described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) is similar to this dilemma, meaning that living traditions are selectively curated and preserved for consumption rather than as adaptive practices.

While the Fuxi cult may threaten its authenticity, it also offers new avenues for its inheritance and participation, with the government incorporating it into its cultural tourism strategy. Events such as the Fuxi Cultural Festival and Fuxi + Rock demonstrate attempts to redefine ancient symbols in modern ways. These changes have prompted a reconsideration of authenticity itself. Bendix says authenticity is the ability to reinterpret the cult through time over text, meaning in different contexts.

The role of local institutions must be taken seriously. While policy frameworks and funding mechanisms are crucial, the vitality of the Fuxi cult depends on the daily activities of villagers, temple guardians, and cultural practitioners. Informal knowledge networks such as oral storytellers, women's cooking groups, and children's craft circles are not controlled by formal institutions. This decentralized heritage ecosystem is similar to recent research on "living heritage," which focuses on participation, inheritance, and emotional connections rather than formal preservation.

For example, the reenactment of the "Fuxi Opening the Eight Trigrams" ritual was presented during fieldwork at the 2023 Xinle Fuxi Cultural Festival. During an interview with Mr. Li, a local temple drummer in his sixties, he discovered that several basic rhythmic patterns and sacred beat sequences passed down by his grandfather had been omitted in favor of a more dramatic and audience-friendly adaptation. This was despite the performance following a pre-prepared ritual flow. Similarly, a young person recruited to play the "sacrificial attendant"—a college student—admitted that she knew nothing about the Fuxi myth but joined in order to get a performance opportunity offered by the local cultural department. These examples demonstrate a symbolic shift: sacred ritual gestures are performed without complete understanding, and traditional roles are rearranged to fit modern contexts. Despite this dilution, elders still provide informal guidance in secrecy, and villagers spontaneously participate in preparing sacrificial food and decorating the altar. This suggests that deep-rooted living knowledge still exists. These living details underpin theoretical concerns about ritual authenticity and underscore the importance of ensuring both specific intergenerational inheritance and formal legacy planning.

The case of Xinle has sparked a broader discussion about the future of intangible cultural heritage in East Asia. As China views its cultural heritage as a cultural soft power, local customs such as Fuxi worship may help shape China's image. This reaffirms the importance of critical heritage studies, as it encourages bottom-up strategies, multiple narratives, and reflective engagement with the politics of cultural representation.

Thus, Fuxi worship should be seen not only as a ritual activity but also as a vibrant arena of cultural exchange where the sacred and the magnificent, the ancient and the modern, the local and the national meet. Its sustainability depends on the

continued meaning it carries in the hearts and hands of those who practice, reinterpret, and pass on its meaning rather than simply being guaranteed by registration or funding.

7. Conclusion

The Xinle Fuxi worship ritual demonstrates the enduring resonance of ancestral memory, symbolic performance, and cultural identity in Chinese society. This study reveals how this deep-rooted tradition continues to evolve and reinterpret its meaning in the context of social, political, and generational change, delving into its historical development, ritual practices, and contemporary transformations.

By tracing the ritual's development from prehistoric tribal worship to a nationally recognized cultural heritage, this study shows that Fuxi worship is not a fixed legacy but a living system shaped by historical contingencies and collective agency. The ritual structures, performative elements, and symbolic gestures associated with the ritual have deep cultural value, but they are also susceptible to distortion or dilution when they are divorced from intergenerational transmission and community participation.

The results suggest that the sustainability of the ritual depends on a balance between preservation and innovation, authenticity, and accessibility. Although government-led revitalization activities have restored sacred sites and attracted public attention, the true legacy comes from the daily activities of residents. People commemorate Fuxi not as an abstract idol but as a living ancestor, honoring him through chanting, dancing, cooking, and crafts. Community-based knowledge networks, informal learning environments, and creative reinterpretations are important mechanisms to ensure that this heritage remains relevant for future generations.

In addition, this study contributes to a broader discussion in the field of cultural heritage studies, particularly regarding the role of performance, identity construction, and grassroots activism in the transmission of intangible traditions. It emphasizes that the vitality of cultural heritage comes from people rather than policies, so protection needs to extend beyond recording itself and involve participation.

Combining state support with community empowerment, educational innovation with ritual literacy, and heritage tourism with cultural sensitivity will help protect and preserve the Fuxi worship ritual. As a place where myth, memory, and meaning intersect, the Fuxi worship ritual not only offers us knowledge about the origins of Chinese civilization but also provides profound insights into its future development. The culture of Fuxi worship is preserved not only in stone tablets and symbolic symbols but also in worship rituals, performances, and collective commemorations. All of this unfolds amidst the sounds of incense and drums.

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