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How rituals construct cultural identity: A Practice-Theoretical interpretation of FUXI worship in XINLE, China

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Abstract

This article examines how ritual practices construct and sustain cultural identity through a practice-theoretical analysis of Fuxi worship in Xinle, Hebei, China. Focusing on the annual worship ritual, temple fair activities, and the sacred landscape of Fuxi Terrace, the study treats Fuxi culture as a living system reproduced through embodied participation, material-symbolic arrangements (offerings, costumes, music, dance, sacred space), and institutional coordination. Using qualitative interpretation informed by local narratives, observed ritual sequences, and policy-context analysis, it shows that cultural identity is generated by repeatedly linking mythic ancestry to shared collective memory, place-based belonging, and everyday moral orientations transmitted through family education and community practice. The article further demonstrates that contemporary revitalization—heritage listing, government-supported festivals, cultural tourism, creative products, and digital media—has expanded the ritual's public reach and economic capacity, while also introducing tensions such as procedural fragmentation, commercialization, and generational gaps in ritual understanding. It argues that sustainable safeguarding requires an integrated cultural-ecological strategy that combines systematic documentation and ritual knowledge archiving with community empowerment, school-based cultural education, and innovative storytelling technologies, so that the spiritual core of Fuxi worship can remain credible while adapting to modern social conditions and translocal audiences.

Keywords: Fuxi worship, Cultural identity, Practice theory, Intangible cultural heritage, Cultural tourism

1.Introduction

Fuxi (Taihao), revered in Chinese mythic historiography as the first of the Three Sovereigns, functions as a paradigmatic ancestral figure through whom origin, order, and cultural continuity are narrated and enacted. Accounts of Fuxi attribute to him formative civilizational innovations—nets for fishing and hunting, the institutionalization of surnames, and the creation of the Eight Trigrams (Bagua)—that symbolically mark a transition from undifferentiated lifeways to patterned social and cosmological order (Zhu, 1997; Birrell, 1993; Wang, 2015). As myth studies have long noted, origin narratives are not simply "stories about the past" but cultural instruments that render collective experience intelligible by projecting social values into exemplary beginnings (Campbell, 1968; Geertz, 1973). In this sense, Fuxi worship is better approached not as a marginal remnant of early religion but as a durable ritual technology through which Chinese communities repeatedly frame kinship, moral obligation, and belonging.

Ancestral cults, in both cross-cultural and China-focused scholarship, are closely tied to the social reproduction of family and community, especially through the idioms of kinship, filial piety, and hierarchical reciprocity (Addison, 1924; Ahem, 1973; Baker, 1979; Hamilton, 1990). In China, ancestral worship has been described as a foundational layer of religious life that can operate alongside, or even independently of, formal affiliations to deities and institutions (Jochim, 1986; Granet, 1975). From this perspective, venerating Fuxi as a "cultural ancestor" situates everyday social relations within a longer civilizational genealogy, consolidating a shared horizon of "who we are" that is simultaneously familial, regional, and national (Chen, 2018; Zhao, 2019). Heritage scholarship further suggests that such practices become especially salient under modern conditions, when rituals are increasingly embedded in governance, tourism, and public cultural programs, raising questions of authenticity, community recognition, and the politics of cultural representation (Harrison, 2013; Smith, 2006; Waterton & Smith, 2010; Anagnost, 1994).

This article examines the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual in Hebei, performed annually at the Fuxi Terrace, as a contemporary site where ancestral devotion,

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heritage-making, and public performance converge. Rather than treating cultural identity as a fixed essence expressed by ritual, the study adopts practice theory to conceptualize identity as an outcome of routinized, embodied, and materially mediated action (Bourdieu, 1990; Barnes, 2002). Ritual, in this view, is a structured sequence of stylized acts and utterances that produces shifts in meaning and social efficacy through framing, repetition, and the disciplined coordination of bodies, objects, and space (Bell, 1992; Kreinath, 2018). The central question is therefore not simply what Fuxi worship "means," but how it works: through what practical mechanisms do ritual procedures, symbolic materials, and institutional arrangements generate recognizable forms of belonging and legitimacy, especially amid modernization and globalization (Berger & Samuel, 2002; UNESCO, 2003). By offering a practice-theoretical interpretation grounded in the Xinle case, the article contributes to debates on ritual, cultural identity, and intangible heritage, and provides analytic resources for safeguarding approaches that attend to living practices rather than only documented forms.

2. Research Objective

The objective of this study is to examine how the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual functions as a practice-based mechanism for constructing and sustaining cultural identity in contemporary China by (1) tracing the historical formation and identity meanings of Fuxi culture as an ancestral symbolic system, (2) analyzing the current ritual practices in Xinle—its procedures, embodied performances, material settings, and participant roles—together with the challenges and social perceptions it faces under modernization, heritage governance, and globalization, and (3) developing practice-informed implications for safeguarding and intergenerational transmission that emphasize living participation, community recognition, and the continuity of ritual competencies rather than preservation of form alone.

3. Literature Review

Research on Chinese ancestor worship consistently emphasizes that ritual is not only a matter of belief but a practical mechanism for reproducing social relations, moral norms, and collective continuity. Early historical work describes the modern Chinese ancestor cult as a pervasive cultural system that connects family, obligation, and public morality through repeated ceremonial forms (Addison, 1924). Ethnographic studies further show how the "cult of the dead" operates as a village-level institution that organizes lineage authority, memory, and community cohesion, turning kinship into an observable ritual order rather than a purely genealogical idea (Ahem, 1973). Kinship-centered analyses similarly identify family structure, descent, and ritual duty as core infrastructures of Chinese social life (Baker, 1979). In this context, ancestral ritual is also tied to the ethics of filial piety: philosophical discussions treat filial conduct not only as moral reasoning but as enacted responsibility, while historical studies show that filial ideals can become political problems precisely because they are publicly performed and evaluated through ritual and governance (Bi & Fred, 2004; Hamilton, 1990; Ebrey, 2004). Anthropological work on death ritual and "pollution" management adds an important layer: ritual procedures surrounding death and commemoration provide a culturally regulated way to transform disruption into restored social order (Watson, 1982).

Within this broader scholarship, studies of Fuxi position him as a foundational cultural ancestor whose mythic image condenses early Chinese ideas about origin, civilization, and cosmological order. Interpretive work on Chinese mythology provides the narrative background through which Fuxi becomes intelligible to modern scholarship, showing how mythic figures function as "explanatory" and "normative" resources for later cultural practice (Birrell, 1993). Chinese-language research explicitly frames Fuxi as a civilizational pioneer and a symbolic root of Chinese cultural identity, linking his legendary contributions (e.g., social ordering and cosmological symbolism) to later ritual commemoration and national-cultural narratives (Zhu, 1997; Wang, 2015). From the perspective of early China and religious studies, myth and ritual are not separate domains: cosmology, sacrifice, and authority are co-produced through patterned practices that make particular moral and political worlds appear natural and legitimate (Puett, 2002; McDermott, 1999). Historical syntheses of early empires and social ideology further suggest that legendary ancestors can be mobilized to stabilize shared frameworks of belonging, especially when ritual practice embeds these figures into public life (Lewis, 2007).

More recent scholarship has begun to connect these longer historical and symbolic discussions to contemporary cultural policy and heritage-making. Studies explicitly argue that Fuxi worship contributes to the formation of Chinese cultural identity and operates through a recognizable symbolic system (Chen, 2018; Zhao, 2019). At the same time, documentation and compilation work on festival protection achievements indicates the growing institutionalization of Fuxi-related rituals as cultural heritage programs, which may reshape local participation, narrative emphasis, and performance aesthetics (Jia, 2018). Critical heritage studies provide a useful lens for interpreting this shift: safeguarding frameworks emphasize transmission and community participation as the core of intangible heritage, yet heritage is also a field of authorization and negotiation, shaped by expert discourse, state agendas, and public representation (UNESCO, 2003; Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). Work on "community heritage" further shows that recognition can be uneven—ritual actors may be included symbolically while their interpretations and authority are reframed by institutional logics (Waterton & Smith, 2010). Studies of ritual displacement and legitimation in modern Asian settings underline that ritual revival is rarely neutral; it is often entangled with state formation, modernization, and the reorganization of religion in public space (Anagnost, 1994; Chau, 2005).

Theoretically, this article aligns with approaches that treat ritual as practice and identity as something produced through doing. Bell's ritual theory shifts attention from ritual as a container of symbols to ritualization as strategic action that differentiates roles, produces authority, and generates social effects (Bell, 1992). Practice theory reinforces this move by focusing on embodied routine and material mediation as the basis of social reproduction—identity becomes durable because it is enacted and learned through repeated participation rather than simply asserted as a belief (Bourdieu, 1990; Barnes, 2002). Building on these debates, the present study treats the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual as a practice ensemble—procedures, roles, objects, space, and performance—through which cultural identity is enacted, recognized, and stabilized under contemporary heritage governance and public cultural life.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative case-study design to examine how the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual constructs cultural identity through embodied and routinized practice. Xinle City (Hebei Province) was selected because the annual ritual at Fuxi Terrace is a representative, publicly organized form of Fuxi cultural heritage and ancestral worship. The analysis centers on the annual ceremony held on the 16th day of the third lunar month, with attention to its procedural sequence, artistic performances (music, ceremonial guard formations, ritual dance), symbolic materials, and participant roles. Fieldwork and document work were conducted over September 2023–April 2025.

4.2 Research site and participants

The primary research site is Fuxi Terrace in Xinle, supplemented by local cultural institutions and archives. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to capture perspectives from ritual authority, heritage governance, and community participation. Three groups were included: key informants (n=10) (e.g., Fuxi-culture specialists, cultural management and museum staff, folk-organization leaders), casual informants (n=12) (e.g., officiants, custodians, performers, volunteers, worshipers, community elders, youth participants), and general informants (n=15) (e.g., tourists, visitors, photographers, media workers, cultural enthusiasts). This structure supports comparison between expert accounts, practitioner knowledge, and audience interpretations.

4.3 Data collection

Four complementary methods were used. First, document and archival analysis drew on materials from the Hebei Provincial Library, Shijiazhuang Municipal Library, Xinle City Cultural Center, and the Fuxi Terrace Cultural Heritage Office, including local chronicles and research reports, alongside modern scholarship on Fuxi culture and ritual symbolism (e.g., Zhu, 1997; Liu, 2003; Zhang, 2010). Policy texts were also consulted to situate the case within intangible heritage safeguarding, including UNESCO's 2003 Convention and regional safeguarding plans.

Second, field investigation and ritual mapping recorded the ritual's eight ceremonial steps and their sequencing, including offerings, eulogies, music, guard formations, and ritual dance. Data were captured through structured field forms, written notes, photography, and video/audio recording, with attention to spatial layout, objects, and coordination of performers and officials.

Third, semi-structured interviews and oral histories were conducted with organizers, cultural officials, terrace custodians, officiants, performers, elders, and youth participants. Interview prompts focused on (a) meanings attributed to key actions and offerings, (b) organization and custodianship, (c) safeguarding measures and perceived problems, and (d) intergenerational learning and motivation. Oral-history questions were used with elders to trace perceived changes over time, and youth-oriented questions examined contemporary understandings of participation.

Fourth, participant and non-participant observation documented the full ritual process, focusing on embodied actions (gesture, chanting, offering sequences), role differentiation (officiants, guards, performers, officials), and audience engagement. Observations compared how different groups—local elders, students, worshipers, and visitors—responded to major ritual moments and how solemnity, spectacle, and "heritage" framing were produced in practice.

4.4 Data analysis and trustworthiness

All materials (fieldnotes, interview transcripts, photos, and audio/video logs) were organized and analyzed using qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis. Analysis proceeded through coding and thematic consolidation aligned with the study's aims, generating categories such as ritual authority and competence, material-symbolic mediation, performance and participation, heritage governance, and intergenerational transmission. Findings were strengthened through triangulation across methods (documents–interviews–observation) and across participant groups (key–casual–general), enabling both corroboration and identification of contested meanings. The interpretive lens is practice theory, treating cultural identity as an outcome of repeated, socially organized action rather than a fixed attribute; accordingly, analysis emphasizes how participants learn and enact ritual competence, how objects and space structure participation, and how institutional arrangements shape public recognition of "cultural identity." Ethical procedures included informed consent before recording and anonymization of identities in write-up when needed.

5. Results

5.1 Ritual practice as an identity-making mechanism in XINLE FUXI worship

From a practice-theoretical perspective, the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual is not only a commemorative event but a generative social practice through which cultural identity is continuously produced and confirmed. Identity here is not treated as a fixed "belief" located inside individuals; rather, it emerges through patterned participation in a shared ceremonial order. The annual recurrence of the ritual—anchored in a stable sequence of offerings, eulogies, music, guard formations, and ritual dance—creates an authoritative script that organizes what participants do, say, and feel. By repeatedly enacting this script, the community transforms an abstract cultural narrative ("Fuxi as the cultural ancestor") into a publicly observable reality: Fuxi becomes present as a figure of collective origin, moral legitimacy, and historical continuity.

This identity-making process operates through embodied repetition. The ritual requires participants to learn and reproduce specific bodily techniques: how to stand in formation, how to move in procession, when to bow, how to present offerings, how to coordinate gesture with music and chant, and how to maintain solemnity in the ritual space. Over time, these repeated bodily and communicative routines cultivate a shared habitus—a practical sense of "how one should act" in relation to ancestry, sacred space, and communal hierarchy. In this sense, cultural identity is not only "explained" through texts or speeches; it is trained through the body and stabilized through performance.

Identity is also produced through the ritual's division of roles and competencies. Different actors occupy distinct but interdependent positions: ritual specialists and officiants provide procedural

authority and symbolic interpretation; custodians manage sacred space and preparation; performers translate cultural memory into aesthetic form through music and dance; guard teams embody discipline and order through synchronized formations; cultural officials represent institutional recognition and heritage governance; elders and long-term local participants provide intergenerational continuity and moral witness. Practice theory highlights that such roles are not merely functional—they allocate legitimacy and define who is entitled to speak, lead, perform, or evaluate the "proper" enactment of tradition. Through this coordinated division of ritual labor, the community reproduces a social map of authority while simultaneously presenting a unified cultural image to insiders and outsiders.

The ritual's material and spatial infrastructure further intensifies identity formation. Objects and settings—sacrificial wine and offerings, ritual texts and eulogies, costumes and props, instruments and sound cues, the architecture and symbolism of Fuxi Terrace—do not simply decorate the event; they help anchor meaning and guide action. The terrace functions as a privileged site where place-based memory becomes tangible: it stabilizes the claim that Xinle is not only a location of worship but a culturally authorized space of origin. Similarly, music, chanting, and choreographed movement produce a shared sensory environment that aligns attention and emotion, making collective belonging experientially vivid. In practice-theoretical terms, these materials are part of the "toolkit" and "arrangements" that enable the ritual to be repeatable, recognizable, and socially compelling.

Crucially, the Xinle ritual constructs identity by linking heritage, governance, and community participation into a single practice-field. On one side, heritage discourse and official involvement frame the ritual as intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing preservation, standardization, and public presentation. On the other side, local participation sustains the ritual as lived tradition, where meaning is negotiated through preparation work, interpersonal relations, and intergenerational learning. The ritual thus operates as a meeting point between institutional cultural policy and everyday cultural life. Rather than weakening authenticity, this interaction can be read as a contemporary condition of ritual continuity: identity is produced through the practical alignment of official recognition, local competence, and collective performance.

In sum, the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual constructs cultural identity by doing identity—through repeated sequences that discipline bodies, distribute authority, organize space and materials, and synchronize emotion and attention around a shared ancestral figure. Cultural identity is therefore a practical achievement: it is enacted, witnessed, evaluated, and transmitted through the ritual's recurring performance. Through this process, the community does not merely remember Fuxi; it actively reproduces a sense of "we-ness" grounded in ancestry, place, and a publicly legible ceremonial order.

5.2 The ritual field is increasingly "dual-structured" (official–folk), producing both expansion and tension in cultural identity construction

The contemporary Xinle Fuxi ritual shows a clear dual structure in its organizational logic and social functions: it simultaneously operates as a state-supported heritage ceremony (public/official sacrifice) and as a grassroots religious-communal practice (folk sacrifice). This duality has significantly expanded the ritual's visibility and participation scale, but it also generates structural tensions that directly shape how cultural identity is produced, experienced, and transmitted.

On the one hand, official-led revival and heritage governance have strengthened the ritual's public legitimacy and symbolic authority. Since the resumption of public sacrificial activities in the mid-1990s, the ritual calendar and event design have become increasingly institutionalized and programmable, with standardized ceremonial sequences (e.g., formal music, cannon salutes, drum-and-bell procedures, sacrificial text reading, and choreographed offerings). The inclusion of the ritual on provincial (2009) and national (2011) intangible cultural heritage lists further consolidated its status as a nationally recognizable cultural emblem. In practice-theoretical terms, this institutional "front-stage" ritualization constructs a high-visibility identity script: participants are positioned as representatives of a shared ancestral lineage, while

the ritual space (Fuxi Terrace and newly built sacrificial squares/altars) becomes a curated arena where "being descendants of Fuxi" is performed in a publicly legible way through formal roles, costumes, formations, and ceremonial protocols.

On the other hand, the folk sacrificial system continues to function as the ritual's everyday infrastructure of meaning, sustaining intimate forms of belief and communal belonging through local associations, village-based preparations, temple fairs, and recurrent worship on lunar dates (e.g., first and fifteenth days). Folk rites—such as welcoming and sending off deities, incense offerings, kneeling, Nuo performances, and sharing of offerings—produce identity through repeated embodied participation and relational proximity (kinship, neighborhood, local moral economy). From a practice-theoretical viewpoint, this "back-stage" sphere maintains the ritual as a lived practice rather than a symbolic spectacle: identity is learned through doing, sustained through interpersonal obligations, and embedded in seasonal rhythms and everyday moral life.

However, the coexistence of these two spheres also produces contradictions that have become increasingly visible under modernization pressures. First, the decline of folk belief and weakening of intergenerational transmission reduces the density of grassroots participation, making folk organizations more fragile and threatening the continuity of craft skills, ritual knowledge, and performance repertoires. Second, infrastructural deterioration and restoration limitations within the temple complex constrain the reproduction of historically meaningful spatial arrangements; when sacred architecture cannot be fully restored, ritual action is forced into temporary or redesigned venues, which can alter the sensory atmosphere and the practical "feel" of authenticity. Third, the loss of ritual props and craftsmanship encourages substitution with modern standardized items, weakening the symbolic thickness of material culture and disrupting the embodied pedagogy through which participants learn ritual competence. Finally, logistical and accessibility constraints (transportation inconvenience and limited supportive infrastructure) restrict the inflow of broader publics and reduce the ritual's capacity to convert visitors into sustained participants, thereby limiting identity formation beyond episodic attendance.

Taken together, these findings indicate that cultural identity in Xinle Fuxi worship is constructed through a field of practice shaped by the interaction of institutional heritage-making and grassroots religious life. The ritual's dual structure enables large-scale visibility and national framing, yet it simultaneously exposes vulnerabilities in the local transmission system that historically supplied skills, objects, and belief-based motivation. Therefore, contemporary identity construction is best understood as a negotiated outcome: it is continuously produced through the alignment—and sometimes misalignment—of official ceremonial standardization, folk experiential depth, material/space conditions, and participation infrastructures.

5.3 Cultural tourism and media innovation reconfigure the "practice-ecology" of FUXI worship, expanding inheritor networks and strengthening identity transmission

The third result indicates that the contemporary inheritance of the XINLE FUXI worship ritual increasingly depends on an expanded practice-ecology built through cultural tourism, policy support, and mediated communication. In this ecology, ritual is no longer confined to lineage-based transmission or temple-centered devotional space; rather, it is re-embedded in a multi-sector field linking government coordination, heritage institutions, market actors, and audiences. This transformation demonstrates that cultural identity is constructed not only by repeating "traditional forms," but by continuously reorganizing the social conditions under which ritual practices can be learned, performed, recognized, and valued.

First, the rise of festival-oriented cultural tourism ("Fuxi Cultural Tourism Festival" and "Fuxi Cultural City") functions as a large-scale mechanism for public participation and identity activation. Through the integration of sacrificial ceremonies, folk performances, exhibitions, and themed activities, the ritual becomes an immersive public event where participants bodily experience symbolic elements such as ancestor reverence, root-seeking narratives, dragon totem imagination, and Bagua cosmology. Practice theory helps clarify that identity here is

generated through situated participation: tourists and visitors are not merely observers but become "temporary participants" whose repeated engagement can gradually form a sense of belonging and cultural recognition, thereby enlarging the category of "implicit inheritors."

Second, institutional and financial interventions by local government reshape the material and organizational conditions of ritual reproduction. The establishment of research associations, intangible heritage protection centers, documentation projects (e.g., atlases, exhibitions, educational materials), and multi-level heritage listing generates a formal infrastructure that stabilizes and legitimizes ritual practice. This institutionalization does not simply "protect" an existing tradition; it actively standardizes, archives, and curates the ritual, producing authoritative representations and repeatable models that can circulate across educational and tourism contexts. In practice-theoretical terms, these interventions increase the durability of the ritual by supplying resources, rules, and platforms that enable practitioners and communities to sustain recurrent performances over time.

Third, cross-boundary innovation—especially the combination of ritual with contemporary entertainment forms and digital media—reconstructs the communicative reach and demographic structure of participation, thereby strengthening cultural identity transmission under conditions of modernization. The integration of the Fuxi worship ceremony with modern formats (e.g., music events) exemplifies a strategy of "creative recontextualization," in which the ritual's symbolic core remains publicly recognizable while its expressive forms are adjusted to contemporary attention patterns. Alongside this, proposals to employ animation, documentaries, online platforms, and immersive technologies (including AI and AR/VR) indicate an emerging pathway of mediated ritualization: cultural meaning is reinforced through visual storytelling, interactive experiences, and networked circulation. Such mediation expands the ritual's social field beyond Xinle's locality, allowing Fuxi identity to be reproduced through repeated exposure, narrative recognition, and participatory engagement in digital and touristic spaces.

Overall, this result shows that Xinle Fuxi worship constructs cultural identity through a dynamic assemblage of practices—ritual performance, heritage governance, tourism economy, and media representation—that mutually reinforce one another. The key mechanism is not "heritage as static preservation," but heritage as a living practice system whose continuity relies on maintaining a supportive ecology of participation, legitimacy, and meaningful experience in both physical and mediated public life.

6. Discussion

Interpreted through practice theory, the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual can be understood not simply as the preservation of an ancient myth, but as an ongoing social process through which cultural identity is produced, stabilized, and renegotiated in everyday life and in public events. The findings suggest that identity construction occurs through repeated participation in embodied ritual actions (e.g., incense offering, bowing, processions, sacrificial performances), through the circulation of shared narratives (Fuxi as the "human ancestor," Bagua cosmology, dragon totem genealogy), and through the institutional and spatial arrangements that make these practices repeatable (Fuxi Terrace, temple fairs, festival programs, heritage lists, museums, and documentation systems). In this sense, "Fuxi identity" is not a fixed symbolic label; it is an emergent outcome of practice—generated where people, places, artifacts, and stories are repeatedly assembled into a recognizable cultural form.

6.1 The ritualization of cultural memory

The discussion highlights that Fuxi culture in Xinle operates as a mechanism of cultural memory that becomes socially effective only when it is ritualized. The local cultural landscape—Fuxi Terrace, temple fairs, and contemporary cultural tourism festivals—functions as a "memory infrastructure" that anchors mythic time in present-day experience. Practice-theoretically, this is achieved through the interweaving of bodily dispositions and shared understandings: elders take children to worship on regular days and during annual festivals, translating abstract ancestry narratives into habitual actions and moral sensibilities. Such intergenerational co-presence enables cultural identity to be reproduced as practical knowledge rather than mere knowledge-

about-the-past.

6.2 Tourism, media, and the re-scaling of practice

A major transformation is the ritual's re-scaling from community-centered worship to city-branded cultural tourism. The festival's expansion (performances, exhibitions, academic forums, and investment promotion) enlarges participation and creates new audiences, including tourists, scholars, and online viewers. This expands the ritual's communicative reach and provides resources for safeguarding; however, it also reshapes the ritual field by introducing new logics—standardization, spectacle, and economic evaluation. Practice theory clarifies the mechanism of change: when the conditions of performance (who organizes, where it happens, who participates, what counts as "successful") shift, the ritual's meaning is partially re-authored. The coexistence of sacred solemnity and entertainment innovation (e.g., youth-oriented festival formats) shows a contemporary strategy of "recontextualization," enabling the ritual to remain socially compelling, yet raising concerns about symbolic dilution.

6.3 Tensions within a multi-actor ritual field

The study's evidence points to a structural tension between authenticity and adaptability. The ritual field in Xinle increasingly includes governmental agencies, heritage institutions, tourism operators, media platforms, local inheritors, and diverse publics. This produces a layered participant structure: core bearers of tradition, local residents engaging as community members, tourists experiencing the ritual as cultural consumption, and digital audiences encountering it as mediated content. While such pluralization can strengthen vitality, it may also fragment the shared "ritual grammar" and weaken the depth of sacred experience. Issues such as incomplete standardization of sacrificial procedures, insufficient documentation of music/dance/costumes/implements, and limited integration of residents' perspectives indicate that identity construction is vulnerable when practical knowledge becomes disconnected from local authority and everyday practice.

6.4 Beyond top-down protection toward cultural ecology

The discussion further suggests that heritage safeguarding cannot rely solely on government-led projects, even if such leadership is indispensable. Practice theory implies that sustainable inheritance depends on a supportive cultural ecology: stable institutions (archives, protection centers, research associations), living carriers (recognized inheritors, community practitioners), and reproduction mechanisms (family education, school curricula, participatory workshops). The emphasis on database construction, ritual restoration, and youth education responds directly to the risk of "heritage without inheritors." Meanwhile, proposals for creative industries and digital storytelling demonstrate how cultural identity can be strengthened by producing new, culturally meaningful "carriers" that extend ritual memory into everyday objects, media narratives, and educational experiences—provided that these innovations preserve the ritual's core symbolic order and community legitimacy.

7. Conclusion

This article argues that the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual constructs cultural identity through practice: identity is generated by the repeated enactment of embodied rites, the circulation of foundational narratives, and the institutional-spatial arrangements that render myth socially present and collectively shareable. The case demonstrates that Fuxi identity functions simultaneously as a local cultural resource and a broader symbolic framework for ancestral belonging, capable of linking community pride, national cultural confidence, and transregional cultural imagination.

At the same time, the Xinle case reveals the double-edged character of contemporary revitalization. The transformation of temple fairs into branded cultural tourism festivals and the integration of modern media and entertainment increase visibility and participation, but also intensify tensions among sacredness, commercialization, and standardized performance. Without systematic documentation, ritual reconstruction, and genuine community participation, cultural identity risks becoming performative spectacle rather than lived tradition.

The study contributes to heritage and ritual scholarship by showing that safeguarding intangible heritage is not only a technical question of preservation, but a practice-ecological task: sustaining the conditions that enable ritual knowledge to be learned, embodied, and socially recognized across generations. It therefore points to an integrated pathway for future development—strengthening institutional archives and research, expanding education-based inheritance, empowering community bearers, and using technology and cultural creativity as supportive extensions rather than replacements of ritual practice. In this way, the Xinle Fuxi worship ritual can remain a living cultural system through which cultural identity is continuously produced in contemporary society.

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