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One Mode of Order Formation: The Social Practice of Rituals in the Dong Wrestling Festival-Evidence from Ethnographic Fieldwork in Sizhai Village

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Abstract

Embodied cultural heritage often takes shape in festive arenas where ritual practice produces visible social order and public norms. Based on fieldwork in Sizhai Village, China, this article examines the Dong wrestling festival through interaction ritual chains, tracing how preparation, meat distribution, sacrificial rites, processions, singing, performances, wrestling, and post-event visiting enact and stabilize festival order. The findings show that public allocation activates fairness and trust, coordinated rituals clarify roles and boundaries, performances sustain emotional resonance and collective memory, wrestling regulates antagonism through procedure, and visiting repairs social ties. Festival order, therefore, does not rely on coercive force but emerges through linked interactional moments where affective mobilization and procedural boundaries sustain each other.

Keywords: Dong wrestling, Traditional ethnic sport, Festive ritual, Social practice, Order formation

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1. Introduction

Festive ritual has increasingly emerged in international scholarship as a crucial site for understanding how social order is made, sensed, and sustained (Del and Cabaguing, 2024). Scholars have examined not only the ways ritual organizes collective emotion and stabilizes forms of belonging, but also how public life, under exceptional temporal conditions, maintains boundaries, coordination, and a workable sense of predictability (Van and Fischer, 2016). In the context of rural governance modernization in China, attention has likewise turned toward informal norms and the practical processes through which public conduct takes shape (Liao et al., 2020). Approaching festival practice from

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this perspective opens an ethnographically grounded path for examining how stability is produced in grassroots society.

The Dong wrestling festival offers a particularly revealing case. It is not simply a festive gathering or an athletic event. It brings together sacrifice and ceremonial observance, song and dance performance, bodily contest, and dense practices of visiting, hosting, and reciprocal exchange (Browne, 1980; Chanel *et al.*, 2012; Symonds and Taylor, 2014). What unfolds in the festival is therefore more than celebration: it is also the concentrated coordination of village relations and the collective activation of public space. In Sizhai Village, these practices form a relatively continuous and observable chain, stretching from pre-festival preparation, meat distribution, and sacrificial rites to processional entrance, ground-stepping, antiphonal singing, moonlit gathering, artistic performance, wrestling competition, and postfestival visiting. Following this chain ethnographically makes it possible to move the question of order away from abstraction and into the domain of situated procedure, embodied interaction, and unfolding consequence.

Existing scholarship has laid an important foundation for understanding Dong festivals and traditional sport, especially through discussions of cultural symbolism, ritual structure, collective identity, and social function (Fischer and Manstead, 2008; Lizardo, 2016; Lock and Funk, 2016; Rigsby, 2006). Yet two limitations remain salient. Much of the literature stays at the level of functional characterization, offering too little account of how order is produced sequentially in festival practice, reaffirmed through repeated participation, and carried back into everyday social life. At the same time, the competitive component has often been treated as the privileged analytic focus, while the ordering effects of preparation, ritual coordination, artistic performance, and reciprocal visiting have received less sustained attention. As a result, the production of order is often reduced to the effect of a single event rather than traced across the linked situations through which it gradually becomes publicly recognizable.

This article asks how Dong wrestling festival activities generate perceptible forms of social order and public norms of conduct through ritualized practice and community interaction. More specifically, it examines how pre-festival preparation and meat distribution establish networks of relation and an order of fairness; how ritualized acts such as processional entrance, ground-stepping, antiphonal singing, and moonlit gathering cultivate affective ties and shape public expectations of conduct; and how wrestling matches together with postfestival visiting stabilize social norms while deepening community participation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The notion of interaction ritual can be traced back to Goffman's reflections on social interaction. In his account, interaction ritual refers to a procedurally organized form of encounter charged with symbolic significance (Piotrowski, 1987). Such encounters depend on repeatable patterns of action and expression that gather otherwise dispersed individuals into a shared scene of interaction, making possible the emergence of solidarity and a sense of communal experience (Ahrne, 1994). Everyday life is saturated with such routine rituals. In the presence of others, individuals continuously engage in self-presentation and situational performance; through repetition, external norms are translated into recognizable standards of conduct, while shared values are repeatedly affirmed in visible practice (Van *et al.*, 2009). Interaction ritual, in this sense, does more than organize conduct. It also works to restage and reinforce a collective moral world.

Collins systematized and extended this line of thought by insisting that interaction must be understood within concrete situations. Situations, in his formulation, provide action with both boundary and meaning; they are also the elementary units through which social life is assembled and sustained (Collins, 2014). Whether an interaction ritual takes shape depends fundamentally on the emergence of a strong mutual focus of attention among participants. Once such focus is achieved, intersubjective connection intensifies, bodily interaction grows denser, and alignment in posture, gesture, and rhythm becomes more likely. Emotions are then drawn toward synchronization through reciprocal arousal, while emotional solidarity gradually stabilizes through accumulation over the course of the encounter (Collins, 2014). That solidarity, in turn, binds members' sense of belonging to shared symbols and generates emotional energy of a more enduring kind, disposing individuals to invest more deeply in collective expectations and to act in ways consonant with a shared moral standard (Collins, 1993).

Within Collins's framework, bodily copresence is foundational. Face-to-face copresence allows participants to register one another's shifting emotions and bodily orientations in real time, making continuous affective response and

rhythmic coordination more readily possible. It stabilizes a common focus of attention, intensifies intersubjective awareness, and strengthens both the force and durability of interaction ritual itself (Collins, 1990). What this theoretical formulation makes visible appears with particular clarity in the ethnographic setting of the Dong wrestling festival in Sizhai Village. The solemn stillness and ritual prohibitions of the sacrificial rite, the formations and footwork of processional entrance and ground-stepping, the vocal unison and rhythmic attunement of antiphonal singing and moonlit gathering, and the seating arrangements and reciprocal exchanges involved in meat distribution and postfestival visiting all anchor participants' attention to a shared focus. Through repeatable behavioral forms and coordinated rhythms of interaction, such practices generate relatively stable emotional solidarity.

That accumulated solidarity does not remain at the level of feeling alone. It also encourages participants to recognize boundaries and scales of conduct, to follow procedures willingly, to respect order, and to accept adjudication. Festival ritual, in this way, does not merely accompany social order as its symbolic ornament. Rather, through a continuous chain of interaction, it draws the community into a perceptible public order in which norms of conduct are produced, confirmed, and carried back into everyday life.

3. Materials and Methods

The materials for this article were generated primarily through participant observation and interviewing during fieldwork. Formal data collection began on August 16, 2023. The field was progressively narrowed from the prefectural level to the county, township, and village, making it possible to identify Shuangjiang Town in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture of Guizhou Province as one of the main areas in which Dong wrestling continues to circulate, with Sizhai serving as the principal field site. During the preliminary stage of fieldwork, I approached the region's broader cultural system through immersive participation, guided by an effort to understand local life in relation to both the human life cycle and the cyclical order of heaven and earth. Particular attention was given to the wrestling festival held on the fifteenth day of the third lunar month.

During this period, I followed the cultural process linking Sizhai and Zhaigao in its entirety: the jisa sacrifice at the altar, lusheng performance, the chutang procession, movement along the prescribed route and sequence toward the wrestling ground, passage through the drum tower and wind-and-rain bridge, three ritual rounds of caitang ground-stepping, the speech delivered by the resident village secretary, staged performances and public legal education on traffic regulation, the wrestling matches themselves, Dong opera and Dong songs performed on the opera stage, and the rounds of visiting and shared meals that extended across the evening of the fourteenth day and throughout the fifteenth. Rather than isolating wrestling as a discrete athletic event, I treated it as one moment within a larger ceremonial and relational process.

Field practice was carried out according to the working principle of "listening, comparing, associating, distilling, and reflecting." Through this iterative process, Dong wrestling gradually emerged not simply as a local sport but as an embodied cultural symbol. At the same time, "order" and "interpersonal relational networks" appeared as the most widely shared terms through which local knowledge could be apprehended, and as the central cultural metaphors through which wrestling itself became meaningful. During the subsequent phase of formal fieldwork, I retained this broader cultural perspective and continued to participate in and observe the techniques, rules, rituals, and wider cultural practices surrounding wrestling.

The interview process also evolved with the development of the project. From the preliminary investigation to the shaping of the research topic and then to the formal conduct of the study, interviewing moved from structured to semistructured and, finally, to in-depth forms. The choice of interview format at each stage was determined by the practical demands of the field. Interviewees included the first resident village secretary, township officials assigned to the village, village cadres, retired officials, group-level organizers, village elders, wrestling inheritors, coaches, team leaders, and ordinary villagers. Whenever possible, interviews were conducted in wrestling training grounds so that specific equipment, spaces, and situated scenes could prompt recollection and help participants articulate their experience of wrestling more fully. Concepts, language, and situations associated with wrestling were also used to evoke deeper reflections on its history and culture, as well as on order, interpersonal networks, and governance.

In addition to audio and video recording, I used interview record sheets in an effort to preserve the atmosphere of the interview encounter as fully as possible. Particular attention was given to nonverbal expression, including bodily

movement, tone of voice, facial expression, and emotional shifts, as well as to participants' descriptions of particular scenes and events. The number and duration of interviews with each participant were determined in light of the evolving needs of the research.

4. Results

The public order that comes into view in the Dong wrestling festival of Sizhai Village is not the simple effect of external institutional discipline. Rather, it is composed as a perceptible measure of conduct through collective copresence within an intensified festive time (Davidson and Goffman, 2017). The festival gathers people into a shared spatiotemporal frame, and bodily copresence makes the convergence of attention more likely. Once attention is stabilized around a common focus, emotional synchronization becomes easier to sustain. That synchronization, in turn, provides the affective ground on which boundaries can be accepted, so that intense participation is gradually directed into a structure of action that is recognizable and predictable (Collins, 2019).

What the ethnographic materials reveal is a process through which order emerges in linked stages rather than all at once. Pre-festival preparation draws relational networks together through pooled contribution, coordinated labor, and the practical organization of resources. What is being assembled here is not only material readiness but also a basis of mutual trust and cooperation on which the festival can proceed. Meat distribution occupies a moment of closure and redistribution within this broader process. Through public cutting and share-based allocation, fairness is made visible in a form that can be checked and recognized by all. In doing so, differences in outcome, along with the tensions of face and status that might otherwise remain unsettled, are drawn into a procedure that renders them publicly intelligible and thus more readily bearable.

Processional entrance and ground-stepping further transform collective presence into an ordered public scene. Ranked formations and circular footwork regulate how public space may be entered and traversed, making role positions and practical responsibilities legible in embodied form. Rhythmic coordination compresses arbitrariness, and the order of the scene acquires a quality of anticipation: participants know where they stand, how they move, and what is expected of them. Through antiphonal singing, moonlit gathering, and artistic performance, this ordering process is carried into a more affective register. Choral sound, coordinated movement, and the reciprocal relation between performing and witnessing sustain a shared focus of attention, while collective feeling is repeatedly mobilized and renewed. At the same time, the boundaries of participation are reaffirmed through program sequence and the differentiation of performance spaces. In this way, communal experience does not dissipate with the moment of performance, but gradually settles into public memory.

Wrestling competition marks a further condensation of this process. Here confrontation is not released as unbounded conflict but incorporated into procedural sequence and adjudicated judgment. Contest is given boundary, and outcomes become available to public recognition rather than private resentment. Yet the making of order does not end with the competition itself. Postfestival visiting absorbs lingering emotion and repairs social ties through greeting, seating, hospitality, and ritualized exchange. What has been cultivated in the festival as a sense of rule and boundary is thereby redirected into the reciprocal texture of everyday life.

Seen together, these linked moments make visible a traceable pathway in the production of order. A participatory organizational foundation is first assembled; from that foundation emerges a procedural measure that can be followed; from repeated coordinated action there develops an emotional solidarity that can be shared; and from this accumulated process there takes shape a sustainable public expectation. Public order, then, is not merely displayed in the festival. It is produced, confirmed, and carried forward through continuous interaction.

4.1. Meat Distribution and Pre-Festival Preparation

Meat Distribution: At around 6:00 A.M. on April 22, 2024, the day before the festival, preparations began to unfold gradually within the village. In the early morning, each natural cluster of households commenced pre-festival tasks such as slaughtering pigs and cattle, with meat preparation organized primarily through pooled-share arrangements. These shareholding groups were not formed strictly on the basis of residential proximity. More often, they rested on enduring ties among brothers, childhood companions, or other stable groups of long-term cooperation. Members negotiated their financial contributions in advance in order to purchase major livestock such as cattle and pigs collectively. At the same time, each household was also expected to prepare additional poultry and livestock—such as chickens, ducks, geese, and dogs—to meet the differentiated demands of visiting and hosting at multiple levels during the festival.

Beyond meat reserved for household use and share-based distribution, the meat required by the village committee's public canteen was prepared separately. This was usually purchased in advance under the unified arrangement of the village committee and was not incorporated into the meat-sharing system of the natural hamlets or individual households. Its purpose was to ensure the supply necessary for concentrated festival activities and for the reception of outside visitors. The timing of purchases for fresh vegetables, seasonings, and other cooking ingredients varied across households: some had completed their preparations the previous day, while others acquired them gradually over the course of that morning.

Once slaughter was completed, processing and distribution continued without interruption. After being singed and dehaired, the pigs were carried to the river and repeatedly washed; in the water, the still-warm bodies turned and shifted as blood flowed downstream and slowly spread across the current. During the processing of the cattle, running water from hoses washed continuously over the carcasses, and blood coursed across the ground to the accompaniment of an unbroken sound of rinsing. Cow blood and pig blood were collected together and placed in multiple containers, their dark color arranged in rows, before being incorporated into the distribution process along with by-products such as niubie.

Once cutting began, beef and pork were divided equally according to the number of participating households. Precision in weight was not the primary concern. What mattered instead was the relative integrity and balance of each share, with every portion containing a range of cuts from different parts of the animal. Throughout the distribution process, each stage of work continued in sequence; even the midday meal was brief and did not interrupt the overall flow. The pace of meat distribution was not synchronized across the different natural clusters of households. In some, distribution was completed during the morning and food was prepared and eaten on site, while in others the work extended well into the afternoon, gradually drawing to a close only around 3:00 P.M. Once the process was complete, meat and by-products were distributed in an established order to individual households and the public canteen. After collection, each household shifted almost immediately into the next phase of evening guest reception.

4.2. Processional Exit and Ground-Stepping Rituals

Jisa Sacrifice: According to established practice, the jisa sacrifice is usually scheduled between 11:00 A.M. and 12:00 noon on the fourteenth day of the second lunar month. In keeping with the long-standing village notion of seniority, Zhaigao is regarded as the “elder brother” and Sizhai as the “second brother,” so Sizhai's jisa usually begins slightly later, generally around noon. As the ritual approaches, the village elders prepare a large basin of tea in advance. The tea basin is a pink, open-mouthed ceramic vessel, broad at the rim, deep in the body, and slightly narrower at the base, giving it an overall sense of weight and stability. Freshly boiled water is poured into it, and a bundle of bamao grass is coiled into a ball and steeped in the water. The resulting tea takes on a light reddish hue, soft in color and faintly fragrant. Its taste is slightly green and astringent at first, yet it leaves a clear, moist sensation in the mouth and throat, making it one of the indispensable elements of the jisa ritual.

At the same time, the village elder arranges the lusheng instruments used in the ritual along the right side of the sa altar entrance. They are typically laid out in orderly fashion as two large lusheng, four medium ones, and two small ones, ready to be taken up in sequence. Once all is in place, the elder raises his voice in a loud call, and several young men immediately arrive to pick up the instruments and begin to play. The low, rhythmic sound of the lusheng reverberates around the sa altar, marking the imminent beginning of the sacrificial rite. Soon afterward, the elders from the various natural hamlets arrive one after another and find stools on which to sit. Men and women, old and young, from the areas under the ritual jurisdiction of the sa altar also gather gradually at its entrance, dressed in festival clothing and coming forward in turn to drink tea. The scene unfolds in an orderly way.

At about 12:40 P.M., the core ritual is formally presided over by a highly respected village elder. He first recites the ritual words in a calm yet solemn tone. He then takes the bamao grass and cuts it into sections of about five cun in length, placing each piece in turn on the bluestone slabs at the entrance to the sa altar. The cutting and placing of the grass follow an established procedure, during which onlookers remain silent. Once all the ritual acts inside the altar have been completed, participants begin to move according to a fixed order: the elders first, followed by senior people, adult men, women, and children. They form a queue of their own accord, drink tea, each take a piece of bamao grass, and then prepare to depart together with the lusheng procession.

Chutang Processional Exit: Once everyone has completed the tea-drinking rite, the sound of the lusheng rises again, signaling the formal beginning of the chutang procession. Led by the lusheng, the elder responsible for the sa altar and

the elders of each natural hamlet proceed at the front, followed by the lusheng players, the men of the hamlet, then the women and children, all lined up in orderly sequence. The routes taken by Groups Two, Three, and Four begin at the sa altar, pass the butcher's stall and turn right into Sizhai's main road, continue past the drum towers of Groups Two and Three, and finally reach the main gate of the largest hamlet of Sizhai. From there, the procession passes beyond the stone stele inscribed "Home of Wrestling," crosses the wind-and-rain bridge in front of the gate, turns onto a narrow field path, follows the earthen ridges through the rice paddies, and eventually arrives at the wrestling ground. At the same time, the route of Group One departs from the sa altar, passes through its own hamlet, follows the village's main road to the cross-path through the paddies, and proceeds directly to the wrestling field.

Groups Five, Six, and Seven, by contrast, turn from the sa altar onto the township road, moving downhill through the middle of the market-stall area before finally converging at the wrestling ground. Outside visitors usually go along with whichever procession corresponds to their hosting relationship, though some make their own way independently. Those who have no guests to host at home, who are especially enthusiastic about wrestling, or who are responsible for festival-related tasks all head to the wrestling ground to participate. Other households generally remain at home to accompany visiting guests. Although the routes differ, all of the processions ultimately converge at the wrestling arena.

Caitang ground-stepping: After entering the wrestling ground, the natural hamlets carry out the caitang ritual one after another according to the order in which they arrive, following the established rule that whoever enters first performs caitang first. At the front walk the elder responsible for the sa altar and the elders of the various natural hamlets, followed by the lusheng players, with the men, women, and children of each hamlet following in sequence to form a complete and ordered procession. Together they move slowly around the wrestling ground for three full circuits. The tempo of walking remains even—neither hurried nor slow—and the steps of the participants correspond to one another, expressing the coordination and consistency of collective action. Throughout the circling, the lusheng continues to sound, its music aligned with the rhythm of movement so that the caitang unfolds in a continuous and stable ritual atmosphere.

After the three circuits are completed, each natural hamlet chooses its seating place according to established custom and settles in with its village elder at the center. Members gather in a circle around the elder, and seating follows the strict principle of seniority; no one may sit in a position higher than that of the elder. Once all are seated, the lusheng ensemble continues to play in the area occupied by that hamlet. At moments the music is slow and measured; at others it grows more forceful and elevated, and with the rising intensity of performance, the festive atmosphere within the field steadily thickens. Each natural hamlet completes its caitang and seating procedure in turn until all are in place. Only then do the sounds of the lusheng cease simultaneously across the field, marking the formal end of the caitang ritual and laying an ordered foundation for the festivities that follow.

4.3. Antiphonal Singing, Moonlit Gathering, and Artistic Performance

Antiphonal Singing and Moonlit Gathering: In Sizhai Village, the activities known as xingge zuoyue—roughly, singing in procession and gathering under the moon—begin in earnest as night falls. According to the usual arrangement, evening preparations start at 8:00 P.M., and the formal program begins punctually at 9:00. As darkness deepens and moonlight settles over the drum tower and opera stage, the atmosphere gradually warms. The sound of the lusheng arrives like wind, drawing people out from the thresholds of their homes and into the open space before the drum tower, where they become part of the festival itself.

Within the festive sequence, Dong grand song occupies the opening center of gravity. Male voices sound deep and resonant, while female voices move with a softer, fluid quality; wave after wave of singing echoes through the village and the surrounding valley, saturating the night with a palpable festival atmosphere. The dances "Summer Longing" and "Fanfan Zhong Ka Duo Ga Xin" follow, adding movement and brightness to the scene. Performers, dressed in vivid colors, dance to lively music, displaying the vitality and exuberance associated with Dong expressive culture. They are followed in turn by the dance "Green" and Dong songs such as "Nianchun Gazhong," "Ga Sizhai," and "Niannian Kaichun," each layering further dimensions of Dong cultural life and intensifying the festive mood.

The event draws participation from all the village groups of Sizhai—Groups One through Seven—as well as performers from other villages. Visiting performance teams from Kengdong, Yandong, Shuangjiang, Liping, and Congjiang also take part, adding still more color and flourish to the celebration. The programs are varied in form, including traditional Dong song, dance, and Dong opera, and together they display both the long history and the depth of Dong cultural practice.

Onstage, the performers repeatedly draw cheers from the crowd, and the interaction between performers and audience becomes one of the defining features of the night. Costumes are elaborate; movements are synchronized; silver ornaments ring softly with each gesture; and the singing moves between high, forceful passages and low, lingering phrases, revealing the rhythmic and musical qualities of Dong culture. Offstage, young people begin to dance traditional Dong dances of their own, and laughter and applause rise continuously through the crowd. As the night progresses, some audience members can no longer remain simply spectators and join the ranks of singers and dancers themselves, becoming part of the performance.

Participation is by no means limited to the young. Elderly villagers in Sizhai also take part, sitting quietly beneath the drum tower, watching and enjoying the warmth and calm of the moment. Children weave through the open ground carrying sweets and small firecrackers, setting off bursts that momentarily light the night sky and provoke rounds of laughter. Hosts move through the crowd holding drinks, greeting visitors from afar and thickening the atmosphere of hospitality. Young women gently urge guests to drink, offering homemade rice wine, while guests return blessing and goodwill in the form of red envelopes. Such exchanges form the social core of the celebration.

Over the course of the evening, the boundary between performers and audience gradually dissolves. The distinction between those onstage and those below it becomes increasingly uncertain, until everyone present is, in one way or another, a participant in the event. In this sense, the festival is not merely a staged performance but a process of collective participation and cultural sharing.

As the celebration continues, additional programs appear in succession, including songs such as “Forest Fire Prevention,” “Respectfully Wishing Chairman Mao Ten Thousand Years of Life,” “Pingyang Grand Song,” “Environmental Sanitation,” “Zai La Duo Le,” “On the Golden Mountain of Beijing,” “Anti-Drug Song,” and “Lüqun Dong Song,” as well as dance performances such as “Medley.” Together, these programs span Dong history, culture, and social custom, while also expressing affection for the homeland and aspirations for the future.

As the night grows deeper, neither the songs nor the performances come to an end. Guests change seats repeatedly; as one round of performance concludes, another begins almost immediately, sustaining a sense of anticipation and surprise. Through song, dance, and dramatic performance, xingge zuoyue in Sizhai Village displays the distinctive charm of Dong culture while also strengthening social cohesion among villagers and deepening identification with traditional culture.

The festival night in Sizhai has no sharply defined endpoint. As the moon climbs higher, the lights of the drum tower remain lit, and the night of singing and moonlit gathering continues slowly through round after round of song and dance. Each returning song, each recurring melodic phrase, absorbs into itself the emotions and memories accumulated over the past year, gradually becoming part of the village’s shared cultural memory. In a celebration without a single climax or fixed ending, people sing together and rejoice together, and in that moment their mutual feeling is brought to its fullest expression.

Artistic Performance: The segment of artistic performance begins with a song-and-dance troupe invited by the Liping County Art Ensemble. The performers are primarily Dong women dressed in traditional Dong clothing, with leggings wrapped around their lower legs, fish baskets slung diagonally at the waist, and silver ornaments worn at the head and neck. Under the guidance of the musical rhythm, they unfold their dance in a slow and measured way. The choreography takes its material from everyday Dong life, linking scenes of walking, labor, and reciprocal response through bodily movement, and its overall tempo is expansive yet layered, presenting an image of everyday production and living among the Dong. Step and music work in concert, while the silver ornaments sway lightly with movement, intensifying the combined visual and auditory effect as the rhythm advances.

The next performance is offered by a youth wrestling team jointly organized by Sizhai and Zhaigao. The young performers appear barefoot, wearing uniform short vests and each holding a wrestling belt, and begin a dance in neat formation. This piece centers explicitly on Dong wrestling, combining the bodily movements of wrestling with choreographic structure. Its content includes scenes of village elders presiding over ritual, organizing the wrestling, paired bouts, collective sequences of pulling and counter-pulling, and grouped rotations forming a large windmill-like figure. In its movement design, the dance emphasizes strength and coordination, and through bodily actions of confrontation, traction, and cooperation, it presents the basic form and collective character of wrestling activity. Unfolding step by step under musical rhythm, the performance preserves the overall appeal of dance while also clearly displaying

the procedural and collective features embedded in wrestling, thereby creating a close articulation between artistic performance and the core activities of the festival.

4.4. Wrestling Competition and Postfestival Visiting

Dong Wrestling: When the wrestling begins, two senior village elders, one from Zhaigao and one from Sizhai, stand on either side of the wrestling ground, each holding a wrestling cloth and signaling to the assembled crowd. They first look toward one another and then demonstrate a standard wrestling posture, a gesture that communicates to everyone present that the competition will proceed under rules. Once the demonstration is complete, the matches formally begin.

The Prizes are Notably Simple: The winner receives a towel and a bar of soap; if a match ends in a draw, each wrestler receives a towel; the losing side receives a bar of soap. Although the rewards are modest, the atmosphere of the competition is exceptionally intense. The significance of the match clearly exceeds material reward, residing instead in the display of courage, technique, and respect for tradition.

During the competition, village cadres and group leaders are mainly responsible for maintaining order on site and distributing prizes, while other matters are coordinated by the village elders. With a raised-hand signal from the two elders, the match begins. Two strong men from Zhaigao and four from Sizhai step forward in turn, preparing for a fierce contest. At the start, the wrestlers fix their eyes on one another, then step forward and enter into confrontation. They begin to run, quickly kick off their shoes, and almost at the same moment seize each other in a tight embrace. Bodies pressed together, they struggle in a contest of pulling and counterforce. After roughly fifty seconds, a wrestler from Sizhai deftly exploits the other man's loss of balance, throws him to the ground, and pins him with force, shouting a loud "Hai!" to signal victory. At that moment, the Sizhai spectators rise together, clapping and cheering enthusiastically for their side.

The matches that follow remain equally dramatic. In the second bout, the two wrestlers again lock together almost immediately and enter an even more intense struggle. Their movements are swift; the amplitude of their throws is large; the techniques on display are varied; at one point, the straw laid across the ground is flung into the air by the force of the wrestling. In the end, the Sizhai wrestler wins with a skillful shoulder throw, prompting another round of cheers and standing applause from the Sizhai crowd. As the event continues, bouts from other groups also unfold one after another. Some wrestlers win all their matches; others end in draws. Competitors of different ages take the field, and the different styles of wrestling bring spectators a rich visual experience.

Alongside the conventional wrestling techniques, the competition also produces moments of humor and surprise. Some participants withdraw early out of lack of confidence, provoking laughter from the crowd. Others win admiration through highly refined technique. In particular, the "elegant wrestling" displayed by some older wrestlers fills the scene with both applause and laughter. Visiting tourists also become active participants: after matches end, they enthusiastically join in conversation and, at the small stalls near the field, exchange impressions of the most exciting moments with local villagers while trying to understand the culture of wrestling more directly.

The atmosphere of wrestling extends well beyond the match itself. As the competition proceeds, the mood steadily rises, and spectators' enthusiasm is repeatedly reignited by impressive movements. Although the weather is hot and the ground of the arena is slippery, villagers do not retreat; they remain seated even in the mud to watch the wrestling. Some stand on elevated ground around the field or climb onto the platform in search of a better angle from which to witness the action. Whatever the conditions, the people gathered around the arena maintain their intensity, and the interactions and laughter among them form one of the most distinctive features of the event.

After the peak of the competition, more than sixty matches have been completed in total. Wrestlers of different ages and body types sweat through their bouts as cheers rise and fall around them. The event displays not only the intricacy of wrestling technique but also the importance of traditional Dong sport within village life. Interaction, amusement, and competition are interwoven, giving the entire occasion its palpable vitality.

With the end of the wrestling matches, village cadres and group leaders begin to tidy the field, chatting at the same time about the amusing moments of the afternoon. Memorable scenes, laughter during the bouts, and words of encouragement become topics of lively discussion among villagers. Although the wrestling has concluded, the mood of postmatch conversation carries forward an expectation that everyone will gather again next year to continue the transmission of this old Dong wrestling culture. As the event ends, villagers begin to return home to attend to their guests, making plans to gather again in the near future and once more share in the joy and intensity that wrestling brings.

Visiting: After the wrestling ends, at around 4:30 P.M., the crowd at the arena gradually thins, and people return to the homes of friends to continue visiting. Visiting at this time differs somewhat from the previous evening, the fourteenth day of the second lunar month. On this night, visiting generally takes two forms.

One involves returning to the home of friends, making use of the dishes already prepared while adding a few newly cut ingredients to enrich the meal. Once the preparations are complete, everyone resumes eating. Around the table, conversation revolves around the amusing and memorable moments of the wrestling that afternoon: especially striking scenes, the beauty of particular movements, the performance of wrestlers widely recognized in recent years as champions, whether any rule violations occurred, and how the village elders handled them. Once wrestling-related discussion tapers off, the atmosphere becomes more animated. People begin to toast one another and express the hope of gathering again the following year. Some take out a pipa-like instrument and begin to play, heightening the mood of the evening still further. Others continue to sing Dong songs or, using the open yard nearby, perform Dong opera together with friends.

The other form of visiting is organized by the village according to whether there are guests who have come from afar. When such guests are present, the village arranges reception in accordance with their number and status. Village elders first determine which drum towers will take responsibility for hosting them; usually several of the main drum towers share this work. Once the hosting drum towers have been confirmed, the elders summon the male members of their natural hamlet to prepare the meal together in a public area. At this point men, women, old people, and children all take part, each carrying out tasks such as chopping vegetables, tending the fire, and seasoning dishes in an orderly way. Once the food is ready, the village elders invite the guests from afar to take their seats one by one. During dinner, everyone sits together in a lively atmosphere, exchanging conversation and toasts while discussing the festival activities, the wrestling matches, and the development of the village. Visiting at this moment is not simply about enjoying food. It is also a means of deepening friendship and exchange. By about 10:00 or 10:30 p.m., the series of activities gradually draws to a close, and guests slowly disperse and return home.

Meat distribution and pre-festival preparation draw the festival into a relational structure that can be collaboratively sustained. Share-based preparation, the sequence of distribution, and the manner of collection translate demands for fairness into procedural details that can be publicly checked, observed, and evaluated, while also weaving cooperative relations among households in advance. Processional exit and ground-stepping then draw the gathered population into a common rhythm of action. Queue position, uniform steps, and circular movement render identity, responsibility, and behavioral boundary visible, allowing participants, through synchronized action, to acquire shared attention and an expectation of order. Antiphonal singing, moonlit gathering, and artistic performance further transform emotional mobilization into collective attachment. Choral sound, dance steps, performer-audience interaction, and the alternation of appearances keep public space in a state of sustained gathering; collective memory deepens through repeated rhythm and response, and public identification is thereby stabilized. Wrestling matches and postfestival visiting then complete the concentrated testing of norms and the rearrangement of relations (Wertsch, 2009). Competition procedure and adjudicative judgment confine confrontation within acceptable limits, and the outcomes of victory and defeat acquire recognition under public witness; afterward, ritual exchange restores balance to social interaction, preventing competitive feeling from spilling outward into long-term rupture. Taken together, these four linked moments give the production of order both a verifiable foundation in resource distribution and the supportive conditions of bodily synchronization and affective resonance, before finally consolidating and extending it through public adjudication and relational repair (Vinyals et al., 2015).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

By following the chain of action through which the Dong wrestling festival unfolds in Sizhai Village, this article has shown how festival order is not given in advance but gradually takes form through continuous practice, eventually settling into shared public expectation. What emerges from the ethnographic materials is not a single ordering mechanism, but a linked sequence of processes through which fairness, boundary, emotional attunement, and normative recognition are progressively assembled. Pre-festival preparation and the distribution of meat work through pooled contribution and publicly verifiable procedures of allocation to accommodate difference and generate a sense of fairness and public trust. Processional entrance and ground-stepping, organized through ranked formations and circular rhythms, make position and responsibility legible while turning spatial movement into repeatable public action. Antiphonal singing, moonlit gathering, and artistic performance sustain mutual attention through ongoing circuits of performing and witnessing, producing emotional synchronization and reinforcing collective memory and public identification through

shared rhythm and symbolic narration. Wrestling matches and postfestival visiting then complete this process in a particularly striking way: contest is bounded by procedure and adjudication so that victory and defeat can enter the domain of public judgment rather than private grievance, while visiting afterward redirects lingering affect and social ties into reciprocal exchange, allowing norms to return to the texture of everyday life and continue there.

Seen in this light, the contribution of the article lies in extending the analytic purchase of interaction ritual chains. The ethnographic case suggests, first, that under festive conditions mutual focus and rhythmic coordination do not merely generate collective emotion; they also render procedure and boundary acceptable as shared expectations. Affect, in other words, does not stand apart from order. It becomes one of the conditions through which order is made inhabitable. Second, the making of order appears here as a process composed of multiple articulated moments. Distribution, ritual, performance, and competition do not duplicate one another. Each undertakes a distinct kind of work—accommodating difference, stabilizing expectation, sustaining emotional continuity, and containing conflict—yet each becomes effective only in relation to the others. What the festival reveals, then, is a chain-like process through which public order is composed across situations rather than imposed at a single point.

The ethnographic implications of this argument also extend beyond the immediate case. One concerns the vitality of cultural heritage. Heritage remains socially alive not simply by being preserved as symbol or spectacle, but by being embedded in participatory and repeatable procedures through which people learn, enact, and recognize it in ordinary experience. The other concerns rural governance. Where process is transparent and roles are distributed in recognizable ways, fairness and boundary-consciousness become more readily accepted, and public rules become more practically enforceable. Festival, in this sense, offers not only a ceremonial form but also a mode of ordering public life.

The study nevertheless remains limited by the scope and conditions of its materials. The ethnographic evidence comes primarily from Sizhai Village and from a specific festival node, while the number of interviewees and the conditions of data collection were shaped by temporal access to the field and the routes through which entry became possible. The materials therefore carry a strong situational quality and remain marked by the researcher's position within the field. Different villages may also vary in organizational intensity, resource conditions, and the degree of external intervention. Future work could widen the comparative frame across villages and extend the period of observation in order to test which segments of the action chain remain stable across different settings. Building on qualitative thick description, it would also be valuable to develop more systematic forms of process recording and comparative organization and, where appropriate, to introduce quantitative approaches so as to strengthen the robustness of the evidentiary base and the persuasiveness of the theoretical argument.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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