

A Study on the Evolution of Classical Dance Forms and the Transformation of Aesthetic Paradigms in China from a Social-Historical Perspective

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Abstract: Chinese classical dance embodies China's unique dance style and aesthetic form, aligning with the aesthetic needs and value orientations of the Chinese people, serving as a representative artistic symbol and identifier of Chinese dance. After over seven decades of development and inheritance, accompanied by the continuous evolution of Chinese society, the aesthetic paradigm of Chinese classical dance has undergone significant shifts. This paper, grounded in a socio-historical perspective and drawing on sociological research methodologies, focuses on the development of classical dance as its main thread. By tracing the evolutionary journey of classical dance across different periods, it systematically summarizes and synthesizes the shifts in its dance forms and the transformations in aesthetic paradigms.

Keywords: social-historical research method; classical dance; dance forms

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This paper examines the development of Chinese classical dance from a socio-historical perspective, focusing on the evolution of its body rhythm schools as the main thread while comparing key schools such as Han-Tang, Dunhuang, and Kunqu dance as parallel branches. It specifically analyzes how the socio-historical context influenced and drove the construction and transformation of Chinese classical dance. Finally, by integrating macro trends in social and historical development, the paper provides a forward-looking analysis of the future trajectory of Chinese classical dance, elucidating its broad prospects for development.

1. The Formation and Evolution of the "Shen Yun" School of Classical Dance in China

1.1 From concept to discipline foundation

In the 1950s, when New China was established, a classical dance system that met the aesthetic needs of the people and possessed unique national characteristics had yet to be established. To address this, the first generation of professional dancers in China began exploring the essence of Chinese dance, striving to create a dance training system and ethnic dance genres that belonged to China. In 1950, Mr. Ouyang Yuqian proposed the concept of "Chinese classical dance," initially referring to the dance elements in traditional Chinese opera art. Guided by this vision, major theater troupes successively invited Peking Opera performance artists to teach, integrating traditional opera movements into daily training. Dancer Cui Chengxi participated in the organization of opera dance, systematically compiling it for the first time. Subsequently, the Chinese Classical Dance Research Group at the Central Academy of Drama, led by Ye Ning, formally initiated the systematic compilation of teaching materials while inheriting traditional opera traditions and drawing on foreign artistic experiences.

The establishment of the Beijing Dance School in 1954 marked a crucial milestone in the scientific and systematic development of dance education in China. The publication of "Chinese Classical Dance Pedagogy" and the refinement and establishment of teaching methodologies for ethnic folk dances marked the beginning of China's dance education transitioning from the traditional "oral transmission and personal instruction" model to a systematic disciplinary development path. During this developmental process, the Beijing Dance School implemented specialized teaching at the secondary vocational education level in 1957, establishing the Chinese Dance Department and the Ballet Department. This specialization effectively optimized the allocation of teaching resources, enhanced

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the specialization of talent cultivation, and led to significant progress in three aspects: textbook development, talent training, and repertoire creation in classical dance.

1.2 Aesthetic transformation under political context

In the 1960s, under the cultural policy of "revolutionization, nationalization, and mass orientation," a top-down academic discussion and ideological critique unfolded nationwide, profoundly shaping the creative and educational concepts of classical dance during this period. This reflection timely influenced the adjustment of steps in China's classical dance, while also bringing about changes in the essence of Chinese dance before the Cultural Revolution ^[1], endowing it with a sense of the times.

In 1964, the ballet "The Red Detachment of Women", co-created by Li Chengxiang, Wang Xixian, and Jiang Zuhui, was unveiled. This groundbreaking national ballet achieved its significance through the innovative fusion of Western ballet art forms with China's modern revolutionary historical themes. In terms of choreographic vocabulary, the production extensively incorporated movement techniques from Chinese classical dance to enhance character expressiveness, thereby establishing a distinctive style in national ballet.

Although "The Red Detachment of Women" and "The White-Haired Girl" belong to ballet in form, they incorporate a large number of elements from Chinese classical dance, showcasing distinct national characteristics. During this period, ballet extensively absorbed the vocabulary of classical dance movements, while classical dance itself could not escape the influence of ballet structures during its development, resulting in a mutual penetration and integration between the two. Under specific political circumstances, the proposal of the "Three Modernizations" requirements prompted a transformation in the aesthetic paradigm of Chinese classical dance. To meet the aesthetic demands of the people at that time, Chinese classical dance developed a unique artistic style characteristic of the 1960s.

1.3 Frustration and survival in times of emergency

After the Cultural Revolution began, it had a profound impact on the development of China's classical dance, severely undermining the training system that was still in its infancy. The daily training content of classical dance gradually replaced by ballet-based training, and its guiding philosophy shifted from being based on traditional opera to a "local ballet" model that integrates ethnic dance movements into the framework of ballet. In terms of creation, "The Red Detachment of Women" and "The White-Haired Girl" were designated as "model operas" and forcibly promoted, objectively suppressing the creative space for other dance dramas. The ballet "Ode to Yimeng", adapted from the original Beijing Dance School production "Red Sister-in-Law", stands as a representative work that employs ballet forms to portray realistic themes. In its choreography, the production emphasizes the application of technical skills, while its vocabulary selection focuses on drawing from real-life experiences. By integrating elements of folk dance, opera dance, and ballet, it creates vivid and dynamic character portrayals. In summary, although the Cultural Revolution imposed restrictions on China's cultural arts, classical dance elements persisted in some works, demonstrating tenacious artistic vitality.

1.4 Reconstruction and systematization in the new era

In the late 1970s, China entered a new historical development stage. With the advancement of the overall dance industry, Chinese classical dance also entered a new phase. In 1978, the State Council approved the restructuring of Beijing Dance School into Beijing Dance Academy, marking a significant upgrade in China's dance education system. It was dedicated to cultivating talents in various aspects such as dance performance, teaching, and choreography. Secondly, the establishment and promotion of body rhythm courses greatly advanced the systematic construction of classical dance's artistic language, giving rise to a series of representative outstanding dance works. In 1980, the China Academy of Art was established, followed by the creation of its Dance Research Institute, which gradually built an academic system centered on dance history, dance theory, and dance criticism, filling the gap in the discipline development of Chinese dance studies. From admitting the first cohort of master's students in Dance

Studies in 1982, to establishing doctoral programs in 1997, and then launching postdoctoral research stations in 2009, it has provided a large number of high-level professionals for domestic and international dance research, teaching, and management institutions.

Throughout the development of classical dance's body rhythm schools, the aesthetic demands of classical dance have undergone significant evolution. Its focus shifted from early mythological storytelling to depict characters, gradually expanding the dance vocabulary and employing high-difficulty technical skills to externalize the emotional fluctuations of characters; it further evolved into conveying specific ideas and artistic conceptions through dance imagery. This demonstrates that the artistic pursuit of Chinese classical dance has shown a continuous "inward-oriented" exploration. With the arrival of the millennium, Chinese classical dance entered a new phase of flourishing diversity, forming a prosperous landscape where multiple stylistic schools coexist.

2.The rise of multiple schools and the expansion of paradigms

2.1 Han and Tang: historical imagination and the return of cultural subjectivity

In the early 1950s, Mr.Sun Ying conceived a fundamental contemplation on tracing the origins of ancient culture. This exploration prompted him to systematically investigate the origins of China's classical dance and its artistic forms, forming the concept of "tracing back to the roots" and returning to ancient culture. In September 1987, the first dance drama "The Copper Sparrow Performers" emerged, integrating perspectives from philosophy, history, ethnicity, folklore, and religious archaeology. Sun Ying employed the unique Han Dynasty step dance form in shaping the dance imagery and introduced the dynamic posture of "Leaning Tower Crescent" for the first time in the dance drama. Through fluid center-of-gravity transitions in movement articulation, the work further enhanced its stylistic form, aligning with the cultural essence of the Han Dynasty and showcasing the dancers' unrestrained yet open-minded spirit.

In 2001, the Chinese Classical Dance Department of Beijing Dance Academy officially established the Han-Tang Dance program, marking the establishment of Han-Tang Dance as an independent school. The following year, Sun Ying led the compilation of the "Teaching Syllabus for Chinese Classical Dance Fundamentals Training", gradually forming a comprehensive teaching system that integrates basic skills training with stage performance. By 2005, the Han-Tang Dance school entered a more stable developmental phase, consistently prioritizing cultural inheritance in its teaching and developing a distinctive pedagogical model. Represented by Sun Ying, the Han-Tang school represents another aesthetic trend and turning point in the development of contemporary Chinese classical dance. The Han-Tang school it established holds significant status in the evolution of Chinese classical dance.^[2]

2.2 Dunhuang: The spatial re-presentation and aesthetic reconstruction of the body in the murals

In the late 1970s, after undergoing ideological liberation and the New Enlightenment Movement, the dance world gradually established a multicultural space characterized by diversity and coexistence. On the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the dance drama "Silk Road Flower Rain" was staged as a tribute production, not only reflecting contemporary dance's continuation of historical traditions but also marking the modern transformation of traditional culture in the new era. Inspired by Dunhuang murals and employing the unique S-shaped curve movement patterns of Dunhuang dance, combined with the choreographic methods of Chinese classical dance, the production transformed static mural designs into fluid dance vocabulary, presenting a novel and distinctive style. Particularly, the dance poses represented by "The Reversed Pipa Performers" vividly integrated the artistic essence of Dunhuang murals with Tang Dynasty music and dance, sparking a creative wave of "retro imitation" in the dance world during the 1980s. Since 1979, Gao Jinrong conducted systematic research on the dance postures depicted in the murals. In 1982, he completed the compilation of "Basic Training Outline for Dunhuang Dance" and created Dunhuang-style dance dramas such as "Thousand-Handed Guanyin" and "The Great Flying Apsaras," establishing an initial rhythmic system and aesthetic paradigm for Dunhuang dance education. In 2011, the publication of "Dunhuang Dance Tutorial" further enriched the training content and methods of Dunhuang dance,

marking the maturity and refinement of its educational framework.

2.3 Kun Dance:refinement of opera flavor and transformation into contemporary dance language

In May 2001, Kunqu Opera was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as an important representative of China's traditional culture. The graceful rhythm and the aesthetic qualities of utmost sentiment and elegance inherent in Kunqu art deeply inspired Ma Jiaqin, who conceived the idea of systematically refining and artistically transforming the dance elements in Kunqu performances. While fully respecting and preserving the original rhythmic beauty of Kunqu, efforts were made to reconstruct the dance vocabulary of opera movements, enhancing their fluidity and stage expressiveness, thereby gradually forming the "Kun Dance" system with independent aesthetic qualities. This practice not only expanded the expressive pathways of China's classical dance but also marked the emergence of a distinctive artistic path for the "Kun Rhythm School" in the contemporary construction of classical dance.

As early as 2006, Zihuajun provided an explanation for the emerging Kun Dance: "Kun Dance, by definition, is a new exploration of Chinese classical dance that originated from Kunqu Opera, refined and elevated through its essence, and systematically integrated. Kun Dance has the potential to become a new school. ^[3] Since its inception, Kun Dance has gradually formed a relatively systematic artistic system, and its developmental momentum fully demonstrates the continuous efforts and significant value of this school in theoretical construction and practical exploration. To preserve the authentic artistic characteristics and cultural essence of 'Kun Dance', Ma Jiaqin conducted extensive field research. Through years of dedicated study, he has progressively established a movement system with complete aesthetic logic, showcasing the unique artistic rhythm of Kun Dance and embodying clear aesthetic features and stylistic identifiers."

Throughout the contemporary construction process of Chinese classical dance, its development has demonstrated distinct pluralistic paths and profound cultural awareness. Han-Tang Dance adheres to the academic concept of "tracing origins," with its construction path deeply rooted in historical documents and cultural artifacts from the Han and Tang dynasties. Dunhuang Dance, on the other hand, directly evolved from the visual cultural heritage of Dunhuang murals, transforming static mural dance poses into dynamic dance language. The construction of Kunqu Dance focuses on "refinement" and "transformation," achieving an elevation from "theatrical rhythm" to "dance rhythm." The formation of these three major schools marks that Chinese classical dance has transitioned from a singular theatrical origin model to a new stage of creative transformation based on diverse historical and cultural heritage.

3.epilogue

Since the concept of classical dance was proposed, China's classical dance has undergone a development journey spanning over seven decades. Today, against the backdrop of China's continuous enhancement of comprehensive national strength and the full arrival of the big data era, the public's aesthetic expectations for dance art have further evolved. A profound analysis of the shift in aesthetic paradigms essentially concerns the path selection for the future development of China's classical dance. The evolution of dance art carries historical inevitability, and the transformation of aesthetic paradigms is equally unavoidable. Confronted with the irreversible nature of dance development, we should actively explore its inherent laws to guide China's classical dance to steadily progress along a path that aligns with historical logic and developmental trends in the future, ensuring its life force flows continuously and thrives endlessly.

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