



The Modern Transformation of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance on University Stages

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Abstract: In order to further promote the modern transformation of ethnic and folk dance and meet the contemporary artistic needs of a broad audience, it is essential to emphasize the transformation paths of folk dance in higher education, and to fully understand the characteristics and modern transformation value of different ethnic folk dances. This paper, based on the analysis of the types and characteristics of Han and ethnic minority folk dances, reveals the significance of cultural inheritance. It also analyzes the value of modernity in folk dance on university stages and proposes paths for the modern transformation of Chinese ethnic and folk dance in higher education settings, thereby providing reliable support for the innovative development of ethnic folk dance in universities.

Keywords: Chinese ethnicity; folk dance; university stage; modern transformation

1. Introduction

Chinese ethnic and folk dance is a cultural treasure developed by various ethnic groups over a long historical process. It embodies rich ethnic culture and the wisdom of the people, representing their spiritual pursuit in life. Han folk dances such as the Northeastern Yangge and Jiaozhou Yangge, as well as minority dances like Tibetan and Mongolian dances, all possess unique regional characteristics and reflect the historical development of their respective ethnicities. As both preservers and innovators of culture, universities are responsible for the teaching, research, and development of ethnic and folk dance. However, with rapid social development and increasingly diverse aesthetic preferences, traditional ethnic folk dance faces many challenges on school stages — such as differing from current public aesthetic standards or presenting forms that no longer meet modern demands. Therefore, researching how Chinese ethnic and folk dance can undergo a modern transformation on campus stages is not only about preserving the cultural features of ethnic traditions but also ensuring the continued vitality and development of these dances in the modern era.

2. Types and Characteristics of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance

Throughout the long course of Chinese national history, various ethnic folk dances have gradually taken shape and settled into distinct forms. These dances not only reflect the cultural connotations and life wisdom of different ethnic groups but also serve as important artistic carriers of ethnic identity. Due to China's vast territory and the presence of numerous ethnic groups, the types of ethnic and folk dances are extremely diverse. The following overview focuses on the main dance types commonly found in professional university textbooks. It should be noted, however, that the diversity of folk dance goes far beyond these examples. In addition to the core curriculum, many minority dances — such as those of the Miao, Wa, and Yi ethnic groups—have also been incorporated into university course systems, passed down through specialized classes or performance-based learning.

2.1 Han Folk Dance

Han folk dance has a long history and encompasses a wide variety of forms. Due to regional environments and differences in people's lifestyles, Han folk dances across different areas display distinct characteristics.

Northeastern Yangge is a folk singing and dancing form popular among the people of northeastern China. Given the region's extremely cold climate, the dance was developed to counter the emotional effects of the cold, expressing excitement through vibrant movement. The core movement of Northeastern Yangge is the "twist," which allows dancers to rotate their bodies freely. During twisting, the coordination of swinging arms and rhythmic footwork creates a lively and emotionally rich performance style. In terms of rhythm, the dance usually follows a 2/4 or 4/4 meter, emphasizing intense drumbeats, accompanied by instruments like the suona, creating a festive and joyful atmosphere. As for costumes, male performers typically wear short-sleeved garments with floral patterns, long pants, and felt hats; female performers wear brightly colored dresses with scarves, and their headwear is often adorned with flowers—reflecting a vivid lifestyle and a personality that is open, enthusiastic, and hospitable.

Jiaozhou Yangge is known for its “waist-breaking” style, marked by elasticity and graceful postures. Originating from ancient sacrificial rituals, it later evolved into a celebratory and recreational dance. The performers exhibit smooth and elegant body lines, highlighting the curves and rhythm of the human form through coordinated movements of the shoulders, waist, and knees. The footwork involves expressive techniques such as “pressing, turning, stretching, and softening,” which carry deep emotional meanings. The music is cheerful and gentle, often performed with instruments like the suona, flute, and erhu, giving the dance a lively and charming quality. In terms of attire, women usually wear wide, round-necked tops and large-flared skirts in bright red, green, or blue, with a long floral cloth tied around the waist that sways with the dance. The overall appearance radiates feminine grace and captivating charm. In short, Jiaozhou Yangge is not only an artistic dance form but also a symbol of the local folk culture of Jiaozhou in Shandong Province, rich in regional characteristics.

Yunnan Huadeng is a popular folk dance form widely enjoyed in various prefectures and cities of Yunnan Province. It developed gradually from local Huadeng opera and features a distinctive, lively rhythm and graceful, flexible movements. Typical Huadeng steps include unique styles such as “regular ankle twist,” “reverse ankle twist,” and “small ankle twist.” The melodies of Yunnan Huadeng are vibrant and bouncy, often accompanied by instruments like the flute, erhu, and moon guitar, creating cheerful and refreshing music. Famous Huadeng songs such as *Embroidering the Sachet* and *Ten Sisters* are widely sung. The costumes are simple yet elegant: women wear short tops and skirts in bright, lively colors, while men wear front-opening shirts, wide trousers, and often sport straw hats or headscarves. The overall appearance conveys a rustic and natural feeling, reflecting the optimistic, cheerful attitude and simple spirit of the people of Yunnan.

2.2 Minority Ethnic Folk Dances

Compared with Han folk dances, the folk dances of China’s ethnic minorities are even more diverse and colorful, with each group showcasing distinctive ethnic characteristics. Tibetan dance, rich in cultural connotation, is closely connected to the Tibetan people’s beliefs and their nomadic lifestyle. This dance style emphasizes strength, expressed through steady steps and powerful body movements. Dancers pay great attention to the coordination between breath and movement, using deep breathing to energize their performance, which enhances both expressiveness and appeal. Their postures are solemn and elegant, and movements such as “sleeve swinging” and “palm holding” are smooth and natural, conveying a sense of mystery. Typical musical accompaniments include Tibetan drums, long horns, and suona, producing expansive, resounding melodies, often paired with high-pitched singing, reflecting the Tibetans’ religious devotion and zest for life. Their costumes are elaborate and beautiful: men typically wear Tibetan robes with belts and helmets; women wear brightly colored Tibetan garments adorned with gemstones of various materials, reflecting Tibetan aesthetic values.[4]

Mongolian dance is vivid and uninhibited, vividly reflecting the everyday life of the Mongolian people. Large, sweeping movements, swinging arms, and nimble footwork reflect the grace of horseback riding or the power of combat. Shoulder movements such as “shoulder shaking” and “shoulder lifting” are passionate, unrestrained, and full of charm. The Mongolian people live to ride and to dance. Musical instruments like the morin khuur (horsehead fiddle) and the sihu create music that is majestic, bold, and stirring, immersing the listener in the vast Mongolian grasslands. Men wear loose Mongolian robes tied at the waist with broad riding boots; women wear beautiful traditional robes with dazzling silver ornaments on their heads, exuding a bold, rugged charm—perfectly portraying the nomadic life of the grasslands.[5]

Uyghur dance, shaped by a long historical background and the influence of both Eastern and Western cultures, possesses a unique beauty. Known for its strong rhythm, Uyghur dance often uses 6/8 or 2/4 time signatures. Its movements are flexible and varied, especially in the expressive use of the head, hands, and feet. The head moves with “shaking” or “nodding” gestures that are light and agile; the hands perform “wrist circling” and “wrist flipping” with rich variation; and the feet emphasize “stepping” and “pointing” with a strong sense of rhythm. Body movements turn naturally, and “spinning” is one of the dance’s core features, including “on-the-spot spins” and “jumping spins” that are fast yet stable. Accompaniment generally features instruments like the hand drum, tambur, and dutar, creating lively and emotional music. In terms of costume, men wear front-opening long robes with belts and floral caps, while women wear brightly colored, flowing skirts and decorative headscarves, displaying the Uyghur people’s friendliness, openness, and rich inner world.[6]

Dai dance, widely popular among the Dai people of Yunnan Province, is a beloved dance form shaped by long-term influences from daily life, production activities, and religious beliefs. Dai dance is characterized by graceful postures, agile movements, and an elegant demeanor, with poses resembling the unfurling of a peacock’s tail. Dancers often mimic actions such as spreading wings and grooming feathers, with the body forming a distinctive “three-bend” shape—reflecting the Dai people’s aesthetic ideals and pursuit of beauty. Birdlike movements, especially those imitating peacocks, are frequently performed. The music, often played on instruments like the hulusi and bawu, is gentle and soothing, reminiscent of a clear stream. Costumes typically include sleeveless tops and ankle-length skirts in pure tones of red, yellow, or green, made from lightweight and breathable fabric. Men wear collarless short tops and long trousers. The overall costume style is simple and

elegant, reflecting the harmonious relationship between the Dai people and nature.

3. The Value of the Modern Transformation of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance on University Stages

3.1 Cultural Inheritance and Innovation

Chinese ethnic and folk dance carries the civilizational memory of thousands of years, embodying the unique history, customs, and aesthetics of various ethnic groups. Its modern transformation on university stages injects new vitality into traditional culture and serves as a bridge connecting the traditional and the contemporary. Due to regional cultural differences, some forms of traditional ethnic and folk dance are distant from contemporary life. For instance, the slow movements in Tibetan dance rooted in religious rituals, or the portrayal of pastoral life in Mongolian dance, may be difficult for modern youth to fully understand. Universities address this by incorporating classical elements into contemporary artistic contexts through stage performances, thereby transforming traditional dance.

Take Yunnan Huadeng as an example: university dance troupes preserve the core movement of the “ankle twist” while integrating modern stage lighting to simulate Yunnan’s terraced fields with flowing lights. They blend classical music with electronic rhythms, giving this ancient dance genre a renewed charm. This innovation is not a rejection of tradition, but rather an awakening of the cultural genes embedded in ethnic and folk dance through contemporary artistic elements. In doing so, young audiences subconsciously absorb the nourishment of ethnic culture while enjoying the performance.

As a frontier of knowledge and artistic exchange, universities offer a unique platform for the modernization of ethnic and folk dance. Faculty and students apply scientific methods to analyze and restructure the movements, music, costumes, and other elements of traditional dances. For example, in the Janggu (long drum) dance of the Korean ethnic group’s Nongak (farmer’s music and dance), student performers retain the drum rhythms and bodily motions while incorporating modern dance floor techniques. This not only preserves the symbolic meaning of agricultural labor but also expands the expressive capacity of the dance, transforming it into a universal language that transcends cultural boundaries and opens up new pathways for promoting Chinese civilization.

3.2 Enhancing the Quality of Dance Education in Universities

The modern transformation of ethnic and folk dance brings a comprehensive upgrade to the university dance education system. Traditional dance instruction often focuses on technique transmission and movement imitation, which limits students’ imagination. Modernization encourages universities to optimize their curricula by integrating dance choreography, stage design, and multicultural studies.

Many universities have introduced courses such as “Creation and Choreography of Ethnic and Folk Dance” and “Stage Multimedia Technology,” guiding students to shift from mere inheritors to creative contributors. At Minzu University of China, for instance, Tibetan dance instruction not only requires students to master fundamental techniques like Xianzi and Guozhuang, but also encourages them to explore connections between dance movements and the Tibetan epic King Gesar, and to innovate using modern choreography techniques. This fosters both cultural thinking and creative expression.

Practical teaching has been strengthened as a result of modernization. Universities have built on-campus experimental theaters and collaborated with local theaters to offer students ample opportunities for stage practice. During these performances, students must coordinate dance movements with lighting and music, using modern technology to highlight traditional dance elements. This improves their technical skills, teamwork, and artistic planning abilities. For example, students from the Dance Department of Minzu University of China performed a contemporary interpretation of Jiaozhou Yangge, preserving the core “waist-twisting” rhythm while using cinematic effects to showcase the historical development of Jiaozhou. This achieved a virtuous cycle of “teaching—practice—innovation,” and helped shift university dance curricula from single-skill training to comprehensive artistic education.

3.3 Meeting Audience Aesthetic Needs

In today’s information-rich and diversified society, audience aesthetics have become increasingly individualized and varied. Expectations for dance art are no longer confined to purely traditional, authentic forms. As a cultural window to the public, the university stage must present ethnic and folk dances that resonate with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities, making modern transformation a crucial strategy.

Many ethnic and folk dances bear strong regional imprints and historical markers, and their traditional performance forms and narratives may struggle to emotionally engage modern urban audiences. Contemporary approaches that integrate dance with real-world social issues can evoke emotional resonance from viewers. For example, a university dance troupe

created *Whispers of the Rainforest* based on Dai ethnic dance. While preserving the “three-bend” posture and peacock-inspired movements, the choreography employed fragmented dance structures and intense musical rhythms to depict the fragility of forest ecosystems, encouraging audiences to reflect on environmental concerns. This shift transforms ethnic and folk dance from a “museum-style” art into an experiential form of cultural exchange.

Modern transformation incorporates various contemporary art elements to satisfy the audience’s growing demand for visual and auditory stimulation. For instance, Mongolian dance combined with modern techniques features dancers wearing Mongolian robes embedded with glowing fiber-optic strips. This, paired with 3D projections of the night sky over the grasslands, enhances visual impact, attracting a large number of young viewers and cultivating a new generation of folk dance enthusiasts. In this way, ethnic and folk dance continues to thrive in modern society.

4. Pathways for the Modern Transformation of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance on University Stages

4.1 Innovation in Creative Concepts

Creative concept is the soul of a dance work and serves as the guiding force for the modern transformation of Chinese ethnic and folk dance on university stages. By incorporating modern artistic elements and engaging with contemporary social issues and themes, ethnic and folk dances can be endowed with new appeal while preserving the essence of traditional culture. Contemporary dance emphasizes individuality and emotional expression; its fusion with ethnic folk dance can break free from the constraints of traditional movements and expressive techniques. For example, when a university dance troupe interprets Miao ethnic dance, they incorporate modern floor rolls and full-body extension movements to vividly express the Miao people’s love for life and reverence for nature. This integration is based on a deep exploration of both dance forms, seeking common ground to create a new form that balances ethnic characteristics with modern aesthetics.

The incorporation of theatrical elements enhances the narrative dimension of ethnic and folk dance. Traditional ethnic dances often rely on movement arrangements to convey emotion, while theatre emphasizes plot development, character portrayal, and conflict resolution. University dance creators draw from theatrical storytelling techniques to enrich the plot and character development of folk dances. In a dance themed around the Dai ethnic group’s Water Splashing Festival, the performance retains the fundamental “three-bend” movement but integrates theatrical dialogue and plot twists to construct a narrative of cultural inheritance and friendship, offering audiences deeper insights into Dai cultural values. Music, as a vital component of dance, can also diversify dance styles when combined with modern musical elements. Traditional ethnic folk dances predominantly use ethnic instruments with steady rhythms. Incorporating electronic music, rock, and other modern genres accelerates tempo and builds a fresh atmosphere. In university performances of Uyghur dance, for instance, the traditional Dutar melody is fused with electronic beats. This not only preserves the distinctive rhythmic traits of the dance but also infuses it with contemporary flair and emotional appeal, sparking greater interest among young audiences.

4.2 Reconstruction of Dance Movements

Dance movement is the core of ethnic and folk dance, and reconstructing these movements is key to achieving modern transformation. This process should follow the principle of retaining core movements and characteristics, while simplifying, altering, and reorganizing movements by referencing contemporary dance training methods and expressive techniques to align with modern aesthetic preferences. In the simplification process, it is essential to preserve the core movements and their symbolic meanings. Every ethnic dance features unique foundational movements—for instance, the “crane step” in Korean dance, which is light and elegant, symbolizes admiration for cranes and the pursuit of an ideal life. Such movements must be retained in any adaptation. Meanwhile, complex and time-consuming secondary movements can be trimmed to make the choreography more concise and easier to understand.

Modifying and reorganizing movements can help create new dance vocabularies. Modification involves changing the amplitude, speed, or strength of core movements. For example, by enlarging the shoulder-shaking (“doujian”) motion in Mongolian dance and increasing its speed, the movement’s power and dynamism are enhanced. In Dai dance, increasing the flexibility and variation of the “peacock hand” enriches its expressive depth. Reorganization involves reordering movements according to new logic and rhythm. A creative example would be combining the Tibetan “tap” step with the Han Chinese “Yangge” step, blending their distinctive qualities into a unified form. Integrating modern dance training and performance techniques further elevates the expressiveness and technical quality of ethnic dances. Modern dance emphasizes control of body strength, flexibility, and coordination. Techniques such as core control and breathing exercises can help dancers perform with greater precision and fluidity. Introducing such training into university dance classes enhances students’ physical command in performing ethnic and folk dances.

Modern dance performance tools like improvisation and contact improvisation also offer valuable references for reconstructing ethnic dance movements. Improvisation encourages students to create dance movements and images spontaneously in response to specific scenes and music, fostering creativity and imagination. For example, in Yi dance instruction, students are encouraged to improvise after mastering basic movements, crafting new steps and sequences based on rhythm and emotional cues. This approach makes the dance more personalized and vivid, breathing new life into traditional forms.

4.3 Innovation in Stage Presentation

Stage presentation forms the audience's first impression of ethnic and folk dance on university stages. The use of modern stage technology, innovative stage design, and costume design can significantly enhance visual and auditory effects, thereby increasing artistic appeal. By integrating lighting, sound, projection, and special effects, a distinctive performance atmosphere can be created. Lighting can convey emotion through color, brightness, and projection angle—for example, warm yellow light can highlight the mysterious solemnity of Tibetan dance, while strong or flashing lights emphasize the bold passion of Mongolian dance. Advances in sound technology make the music of ethnic and folk dances richer and more three-dimensional. Modern sound systems can achieve mixing and sound effect variations, simulating environmental sounds. In performances of Dai dance, the incorporation of flowing water sounds, bird calls, and naturalistic music enhances immersion. Projection technology allows images and videos to be cast onto stage backgrounds, floors, or even dancers' bodies, enriching stage expression. For example, university dance teams performing Silk Road-themed dances use projections of Silk Road maps and historical events, combining them with dancers' movements to demonstrate cultural transmission and fusion. Special effects such as smoke, bubbles, and snowflakes add whimsy to performances. When depicting northern ethnic groups' winter dances, snowflake effects enhance realism and emotional impact.

Innovative stage and costume design give ethnic and folk dances a modern and fashionable feel. Stage design breaks away from traditional static backdrops, employing multifunctional and transformable theater structures, such as elevating or rotating stages, to achieve scene changes that enrich the narrative and visual appeal. Costume design integrates contemporary fashion elements with ethnic motifs. While traditional ethnic costumes are rich in cultural identity but somewhat monotonous, adding new elements increases their artistic effect and modern relevance.

4.4 Reform of Educational Models

Reforming educational models is a fundamental guarantee for promoting the modern transformation of Chinese ethnic and folk dance on university stages. Innovation in dance talent cultivation can begin with changes in teaching plans. The focus of educational reform is to nurture capable and creative students into applied dance professionals. Universities should expand existing ethnic and folk dance courses by adding subjects related to modernization transformation. For example, a course like "Innovative Choreography of Ethnic and Folk Dance" helps students learn basic choreography knowledge and skills while enhancing creativity. Students can select a specific ethnic or folk dance they prefer for innovative choreography, with instructors providing guidance and evaluation to improve their arrangement abilities.

The course "Multimedia Application in Dance Drama Staging" teaches students fundamental concepts of modern stage technology and techniques for integrating stage technology into dance performances. After learning about stage lighting control, sound control, and video control, students can better apply these skills in practical performances to support their dance presentations. "Dance and Social Culture Studies" broadens students' perspectives by exploring the relationship between ethnic and folk dance and their social and cultural contexts. It encourages students to consider the modernization of ethnic and folk dance from a socio-cultural viewpoint. Through case analyses and group discussions, students gain deeper insight into the development patterns and changing characteristics of ethnic dance within various social and cultural environments. Strengthening practical education in this way is crucial for enhancing students' hands-on abilities. Universities can establish dedicated dance theaters on campus, providing students with a continuous platform for performances and practice. This enables them to rehearse, perform, and engage in interactive exchanges internally, steadily improving their performance skills and creative abilities through experience.

Collaborations with local theaters offer students more advanced stage practice and performance opportunities. Students can participate in rehearsals and performances alongside experienced actors and high-level technical staff, learning professional performance skills and stage management. For example, a university might cooperate with a local song and dance troupe to stage a large-scale ethnic folk dance drama, with students taking on leading roles or backstage technical support. This not only enhances their professional skills but also deepens their understanding of the creation and production process of dance dramas.

4.5 Cross-Disciplinary Integration and Collaborative Exchange

Cross-disciplinary integration and collaborative exchange are vital driving forces for promoting the modern trans-

formation of Chinese ethnic and folk dance on university stages. Cooperation with other art forms, various academic disciplines, and foreign institutions and ensembles provides new methods and materials for ethnic and folk dance, fostering its innovation. The blending of different artistic genres blurs the boundaries between them and gives rise to new forms of artistic expression. For example, combining ethnic folk dance with painting can translate the use of color, composition, and symbolism from the artwork into the dynamic movements and stage presentation of the dance. At one university, influenced by painter Qi Baishi's traditional Chinese paintings, the dance troupe designed a performance rich in Chinese ethnic cultural characteristics. The dancers use their bodies to imitate the flowers, birds, and animals depicted in the paintings, while the stage scenery is inspired by the artwork. As a result, audiences not only enjoy the dance performance but also experience the visual pleasure of traditional Chinese painting afterward.

Combining ethnic and folk dance with literature and the arts can provide abundant creative material. A vast body of poetry, music, novels, and traditional dramas carries deep ethnic cultural roots. Students of ethnic and folk dance in universities can draw inspiration by studying such works, interpreting the emotions and stories through their movements. For example, based on love poems from the Book of Songs (Shijing), choreographers can create dance pieces incorporating styles from multiple ethnic folk dances to express the underlying affection and meaning. Utilizing film and media technologies can also amplify the influence of ethnic and folk dance. Schools can collaborate with film production companies to jointly produce documentaries, short dramas, or music videos centered on ethnic folk dance. Through the filming process, techniques, and editing, these productions can reveal the beauty of the dances as well as the ethnic culture and historical narratives behind them. For instance, a documentary on Mongolian dance might portray dancers' training routines, dance innovations, and the stories conveyed, which can then be broadcast across television, online platforms, and more, helping audiences gain a deeper understanding of Mongolian dance history and culture.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration provides both theoretical and technical support for the modern transformation of ethnic and folk dance. Historical research and ethnographic studies through such collaborations enable choreographers to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical context of ethnic dances, offering solid and reliable theoretical foundations for their creative work. For example, a university's dance department partnering with the history faculty can conduct historical verification and cultural interpretation of a specific ethnic dance, uncovering hidden folk legends and customs as essential material for creating dance artworks. Technological collaboration across fields can bring advanced techniques into ethnic and folk dance performances. For instance, cooperating with computer science departments enables the application of VR (Virtual Reality) and AR (Augmented Reality) technologies in performances. Audiences can immerse themselves in virtual scenes and participate in dancers' activities through VR, while dancers can use AR to see virtual settings and objects on stage, integrating their movements with these elements. This enhances the entertainment value and technological appeal of the dances.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the modern transformation of Chinese ethnic and folk dance on university stages holds significant importance. Each ethnic group's folk dance contributes rich cultural foundations for this transformation. By integrating traditional dance elements with modern dance to reflect contemporary themes, the dances are infused with new vitality. Reshaping dance movements helps traditional folk dances better align with modern artistic aesthetics. Innovations in stage presentation using modern technology further enhance artistic appeal. Reforming educational models cultivates outstanding and creative dance talents, achieving both the great inheritance of ethnic cultures and accelerating the transformation and upgrading of university dance education. This also meets current audience aesthetic demands and lays a solid foundation for the fusion of traditional and modern arts.

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