

# Creating *with* Roots

Contemporary Chinese National  
Folk Dance Choreography



Rui Xu

Translated by Emily Wilcox

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CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NATIONAL  
FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY

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Rui Xu 许锐

Translated from Chinese by Emily Wilcox 魏美玲

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Cover illustration: Li Luyao performing Han folk dance Anhui flower drum lantern–inspired solo *Dream of You* (*Yi meng lanshan* 忆梦阑珊) at the 13th Taoli Cup, Beijing Dance Academy, 2023.  
Choreographer: Xia Yimeng. Photographer: Tan Xinlu.

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## *Translator's Introduction*

In the sweltering heat of mid-August 2023, dance students and teachers from 64 schools and universities across China and overseas gathered at the Beijing Dance Academy to participate in a singularly important event for China's professional dance world—the thirteenth Taoli Cup national youth dance education exhibition. The schools were selected from 209 that originally submitted works, representing thirty provinces, autonomous regions, and cities across mainland China, as well as Hong Kong and Macao, and two overseas schools in North America. The exhibition featured 250 projects (including new choreography, performances, and course designs) selected from 2,000 submissions and unfolded on three stages over seven days. Reports estimate that 14,700 dancers participated in the initial round of submissions and twenty thousand viewers watched the performances live, with an additional twelve million views online.<sup>1</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that the mood was electric as audiences and performers took in the formidable outpouring of practice-based artistry, scholarship, and innovation reflecting the latest developments in China's professional dance educational field.

Representing the diversity of training offered in China's dance institutions, the Taoli Cup exhibition encompassed a range of dance styles, including Chinese classical dance, Chinese national folk dance, ballet, and modern dance, with a second round to feature ballroom dance, musical theater dance, and street dance later in the year. Amid this variety, it was Chinese national folk dance—the subject of this book—that dominated. Chinese national folk dance had the largest number of works featured in the exhibition from the widest range of schools and regions. More importantly, from my observations attending nearly all the live exhibition events except ballet, the Chinese national folk dance demonstrations showed the greatest degree of artistic vision and dynamism overall. As a researcher deeply invested in the Chinese dance world who has spent the better part of two decades studying and attending events like these, I was genuinely excited by what I saw in the

Taoli Cup Chinese national folk dance presentations. From thematic content to choreographic experimentation to pedagogical approaches, it was the Chinese national folk dance offerings that best embodied the ideals of dance in higher education: integration of original research with reflexive creative methods to push forward new possibilities for artistic expression.

A desire to make this inspiring field of dance activity more accessible and visible to non-Chinese-speaking audiences is what motivated me to produce an English translation of *Creating with Roots*. In this book, author Xu Rui 许锐 offers a holistic introduction to the concert dance genre of contemporary Chinese national folk dance as it developed over the past eight decades and as it exists in China today. Taking a comparative approach, Xu unpacks the concept of Chinese national folk dance as a cultural and artistic phenomenon specific to China. He explains how it relates to but differs from similar English-language terms such as “folk dance,” “national dance,” “character dance,” and “ethnic dance.” Xu also situates contemporary Chinese national folk dance within a long history dating back to ancient China of interactions between popular and elite cultures across time. Giving the book lasting impact and depth is Xu’s analysis of thirty-seven influential works of Chinese national folk dance choreography. Each of these works embodies an important transition or trend in the historical trajectory of the genre from its emergence in the 1940s to its continued developments in the early twenty-first century. *Creating with Roots* is written from the perspective of a professional insider in China’s national folk dance field. It moves deftly between Xu’s personal evaluations and assessments and a broader historical narrative that incorporates diverse voices and perspectives of Chinese choreographers, scholars, and dance critics. Xu’s choreographic descriptions are vivid enough for readers to visualize each dance, including theme, movement vocabulary, composition, and, in some cases, score, costumes, and stage design. Importantly, Xu also provides the cultural context needed to understand why each work was significant in its historical context. As such, *Creating with Roots* offers an invaluable account both of Chinese national folk dance choreography and of Chinese national folk dance criticism, theory, and scholarly debates about dance making in China.

Part of what makes this translation important and timely is Xu’s role as a thought leader in China’s dance field today. Xu is an influential Chinese dance scholar, critic, and artist who has devoted his career to advancing the field of Chinese dance, including promoting international dialogue between dance communities in China and abroad. Xu also currently serves as presi-

dent of the Beijing Dance Academy, China's premier institution of dance higher education. Xu is fluent in both Chinese and English and speaks about Chinese dance frequently in the public sphere. Xu also publishes academic writing, teaches and advises graduate research, and writes, directs, and produces large-scale dance productions for major professional dance companies. In 2006, Xu earned his PhD in dance studies from the Dance Research Institute at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, the most prestigious program for doctoral training in dance studies in China. While he was a doctoral student, in 2004–5, Xu was a visiting scholar at the University of Utah supported by a grant from the Asian Cultural Council. The book presented here is the English translation of Xu's first scholarly monograph, based on his doctoral dissertation, published in Chinese by Shanghai Music Publishing House in 2014. The original Chinese title is *Dangdai Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao chuanguzuo de shenmei yu zijue* 当代中国民族民间舞蹈创作的审美与自觉, which directly translates to “aesthetics and self-consciousness in contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography.” The Chinese edition received praise from leading dance scholars in China, and it is a work I frequently recommend to my doctoral students as essential reading in Chinese dance studies. In 2020, Xu invited me to produce an English translation of the book with funding from a competitive Chinese government translation grant. For the English edition, Xu and I chose the adapted title *Creating with Roots: Contemporary Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography*. With the support of the University of Michigan Press, this important work of scholarship on Chinese dance by a leading scholar based in China will now be available to English readers for the first time.

My great admiration for Xu and his work dates back to our first collaboration in Beijing fifteen years ago. In 2008, when I was a visiting doctoral student from UC Berkeley studying at the Beijing Dance Academy on a Fulbright scholarship, Xu invited me to be the interpreter for a large-scale international choreography research project called Danscross. This project, launched in 2009 and later renamed ArtsCross 跨艺·舞动无界, was a collaboration between Xu Rui at the Beijing Dance Academy and Christopher Bannerman at ResCen Research Centre at Middlesex University in the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> It brought together dancers, choreographers, and scholars from Beijing, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Hong Kong to jointly create dance, research the choreographic process, and learn from one other. While participating in Danscross, I was deeply impressed by the visionary intellectual and artistic design of the project, as well as the

way Xu himself expertly navigated the complex cross-cultural terrain of the project, moving with deftness between languages, people, aesthetic expectations, and scholarly discourses. I admired the thoughtfulness that Xu brought to each situation and appreciated how his combination of sincerity, openness, humility, and good humor cultivated an atmosphere of dialogue. What impressed me most was the way that Xu firmly but diplomatically positioned Chinese dance forms as equal contributors to the international field of contemporary choreography. The importance of Chinese forms to global concert dance is an issue about which I am also passionate. Thus, it was inspiring to witness how Xu advanced this argument through a project grounded in practice-based research and cross-cultural artistic collaboration. As *Creating with Roots* elucidates, Xu believes deeply in the creative potential of Chinese national folk dance, as well as its role as a carrier of cultural identity that Chinese artists should hold pride in and cherish. This message is one with resonance beyond the Chinese context and is another reason why I think *Creating with Roots* is important.

In addition to advocating for Chinese national folk dance as an artistic genre, Xu also promotes the importance of dance criticism and scholarship, which he sees as essential components of the larger dance field. In the spring of 2009, I had the good fortune to audit Xu's course on dance criticism at the Beijing Dance Academy. In it, Xu spoke passionately about the importance of writing about dance, not just descriptively but also evaluatively and analytically, and of bringing one's own experiences and ideas to dance writing. Xu urged his students to take seriously the responsibility of the dance critic. Dance critics, he insisted, have the power to impact audiences and shape dance's future. In my notes on one of Xu's lectures, I wrote:

要解读别人解读不出的东西，通过这个吸引他们，说服他们。要通过自己真实的感受、真实的体验、真实的观点去说服他们。文字的力量非常强大。只要是真实的、认真的东西它就能打动人。

You must decipher what others cannot. Through this, you draw people in and convince them. You must use your own true feelings, true experiences, and true viewpoints to convince them. Words are extremely powerful. As long as it is true and sincere, it will move people.<sup>3</sup>

In *Creating with Roots*, Xu puts this commitment to the power of dance writing and of the personal voice within dance writing into practice. The

topic of Xu's book, Chinese national folk dance, is a complex and at times controversial cultural and artistic phenomenon that resists simple categorization and interpretation. Because of its particular history, Chinese national folk dance merges inherited folkloric material with contemporary stage aesthetics. It also blends dances of the Han majority with dances representing China's many non-Han ethnic communities. Chinese national folk dance traverses sensitive cultural fissures within China, including those of geography, class, ethnicity, and religion. These categories are often shifting and unstable, and they are challenging to navigate even within Chinese contexts, let alone in international settings. As such, Chinese national folk dance is a microcosm for debates common today in the arts worldwide: How should artists balance local heritage with artistic innovation? How should artists preserve their cultural integrity and creative autonomy when faced with the forces of marketization, commercialization, and Euro-American aesthetic hegemony? What are the ethics of representation in a multicultural society?

As Chinese national folk dance becomes an increasingly globalized phenomenon, there is a need for informed critical discussion and a better understanding of the history, aesthetics, and debates within this contemporary art form. In *Creating with Roots*, Xu steps into this fraught discursive terrain with boldness and conviction and also with his own experiences and viewpoints. Xu uses the power of his writing to make a case for the artistic value and cultural distinctiveness of contemporary Chinese national folk dance. At the same time, he also seeks to shape the future of this art form by advancing specific arguments and calling for particular approaches and directions on the part of choreographers and other dance professionals.

For readers not familiar with Chinese dance terminology, some explanation of key terms used in this book will be helpful. First, as it is used in contemporary Chinese dance discourse and in this book, the term "Chinese" is not limited to the Han nationality that makes up China's majority ethnic group. Rather, "Chinese" is a multicultural concept here that encompasses the cultures and identities of all ethnic groups currently residing in the People's Republic of China. This is similar to the way that the terms "American," "British," and "Canadian" are multicultural concepts that are not limited to historically white populations but instead encompass all the ethnic and national cultures that make up the cultures of these places today. "Chinese national folk dance" is an umbrella category that comprises many different regional and ethnic styles, including regional dances of the Han majority, as well as dances that represent China's diverse ethnic minority

groups such as Dai, Korean, Mongol, Tibetan, and Uyghur. Most of China's fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups have representative dances, and all of these dances together make up Chinese national folk dance. The meaning of the term "national" in Chinese national folk dance is debated and has multiple different explanations and possible translations. *Minzu* 民族, the term that is being translated here as "national," can also be translated as "nation," "ethnic group," "nationality," or "people." It can refer to a specific ethnic group within China (such as the Han *minzu* or the Dai *minzu*), or it can refer to the broader concept of the multicultural Chinese nation (Chinese *minzu* or *Zhonghua minzu*), which encompasses all fifty-six ethnic groups. Because of this ambiguity, the term *Zhongguo minzu minjian wu* 中国民族民间舞—translated here as "Chinese (*Zhongguo* 中国) national (*minzu* 民族) folk (*minjian* 民间) dance (*wu* 舞)"—can also be translated as "Chinese ethnic and folk dance" or simply "Chinese folk dance." There are good reasons for all of these choices, and all three translations are useful in different ways. The reason that I employ the translation "Chinese national folk dance" in this book and in most of my other publications is that it maps onto Xu's theorization of the history and meaning of the term.<sup>4</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, Xu argues that Chinese national folk dance is a blend of the English concepts of "national dance" and "folk dance" and is thus a form of "nationalized" folk dance. When I consulted Xu about this translation decision, he said that "Chinese national folk dance" is the translation he prefers, though there is no consensus.

Three other terms that require some explanation are "contemporary," "choreography," and "self-consciousness." All three terms appear in the original title of the book, and they are important key concepts that organize much of its discussions. The term "contemporary" (*dangdai* 当代) refers here to the historical period from the 1940s to the present, which is marked by a continued transformation of Chinese culture and society since the Chinese Revolution. This "contemporary" era is marked by several important historical events, all of which had profound impacts on the development of Chinese national folk dance, as Xu explains. First, in 1942, the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts, an important meeting that took place in the remote Chinese Communist Party base area of Yan'an during the Second Sino-Japanese War, introduced new party policy on the arts and culture. In this new policy, folk culture gained special prominence because of its association with the working classes, mass culture, and Chinese national identity. In 1949, following the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, the new

government of the People's Republic of China was established. The shift marked by 1949, which is sometimes referred to as "Liberation" or the establishment of "New China," ushered in a period of relative stability in which national folk dance was instituted as a major state-supported art form. In 1966, a period of radical social change began that is known as the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, a more radical arts policy was in place in which many forms of national folk dance, which had previously been supported by the Chinese Communist Party and the post-1949 government, were suppressed. This lasted for about ten years. The year 1976 witnessed the death of two of China's longtime Chinese Communist Party leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and the overthrow of the so-called Gang of Four, a group of party officials including Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who were blamed for the Cultural Revolution. This launched a period of national folk dance revival that coincided with China's period of economic marketization, a greater emphasis on individual expression, and an influx of cultural imports from the United States and other parts of the capitalist world. Since the late 1980s, increased influence of Euro-American modern dance, rapid urbanization and the gradual disappearance of traditional rural cultural life, and the growth of an aesthetically hybrid commercial dance culture, among other factors, brought about new challenges to the aesthetic coherence and artistic direction of national folk dance. The term "contemporary" as it is used throughout this book thus refers to this entire historical period of social and cultural transformation in China since the 1940s in the context of policies guided by the Chinese Communist Party. "Contemporary" here should not be confused with the term "contemporary dance," often used in English-language dance discourse to indicate choreographic work and techniques associated with aesthetic postmodernism.

I use the English term "choreography" throughout this book to translate a variety of Chinese words and phrases that Xu employs to indicate newly devised dances created by an individual for the concert stage. The translation "choreography" thus appears, sometimes in alternation with more literal translations, for *wudao chuangzuo* 舞蹈创作 ("dance creation"), *wudao zuopin* 舞蹈作品 ("dance work"), *wutai chuangzuo* 舞台创作 ("stage creation"), and *chuangzuo zuopin* 创作作品 ("creative work"). I use the term "choreographer" similarly to translate the word "creator" (*chuangzuo zhe* 创作者) or "artist" (*yishujia* 艺术家) when referring to the creator of a dance work for the concert stage. The process of choreographing dances in Chinese national folk dance is quite particular because the genre assumes a grounding in some



kind of traditional dance practice or aesthetic, which sometimes involves field research or study with folk performers as part of the creative process. Because Xu goes into detail about this process and the specific expectations for devising new work in Chinese national folk dance, it can be understood from the context within the text that “choreography” means something specific in this case. In other words, this is a culturally, historically, and genre specific understanding of “choreography,” and it may differ from how the term is used in other contexts of dance creation, criticism, and theorization. This choice of translation was determined in consultation with Xu, who agreed that the English term “choreography” best conveys his intended meaning when referring to processes of dance creation in Chinese national folk dance, to Chinese national folk dances as works for the concert stage, and to dances as products of artistic and cultural research.

The term *zijue* 自觉, which I translate variably in this book as “consciousness,” “self-consciousness,” or “self-awareness,” also requires some additional explanation. The Chinese word *zijue* combines the characters for “self” (*zi* 自) and “perception” (*jue* 觉). Thus, it emphasizes a kind of self-reflexivity, self-awareness, or self-knowledge that is not necessarily conveyed by the English term “consciousness,” which is given in most dictionaries as the standard translation. In common parlance, the English word “consciousness” could simply mean to be awake or to be aware of the world around oneself, not specifically awareness of the self. For this reason, many translators use the term “self-consciousness” or “self-awareness” when translating *zijue* to emphasize this self-oriented aspect, which itself has a specific history in modern Chinese political thought and is often associated with awareness of the nation, political crisis, or one’s potential to impact the future of society at a critical political juncture.<sup>5</sup> As Xu makes clear in the final chapter of the book, he places great importance on this quality of *zijue*. In fact, he regards it as the most critical issue for securing a positive future for Chinese national folk dance. The final section of *Creating with Roots* conveys this meaning through the subheading “Calling for Cultural Self-Consciousness in Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography.” In this section, which summarizes themes discussed throughout the book, Xu argues passionately for the importance of maintaining cultural integrity and a connection to traditional dance heritage, which he positions as an answer to “the call for the lost spiritual home in the commodity society.” What is important to remember here is that in this concept of cultural self-consciousness that Xu is calling for, the “self” does not refer to the artist as an individual. Rather, it refers to

the national or ethnic self of Chinese culture and society, in which the individual artist is regarded as part of this larger cultural community who has a responsibility for the community's future.

In the process of translating this book, I faced many joys but also many challenges. All translation, I think, requires compromise, and the more specialized and culturally specific a subject, the harder it is to communicate in another language. Like any academic field, Chinese dance scholarship has its own jargon. Additionally, much of this specialized terminology is grounded in language that originated in cultural contexts distinct from those of English-language dance discourse. This means that in addition to being in a different language, the content itself reflects theoretical formulations, ideas, and logics that may be unfamiliar to many English readers. The fact that I have been immersed in these Chinese-language dance discourses for a long time is both a benefit and a challenge. On the one hand, I am very familiar with the language and concepts Xu uses in his writing. On the other hand, things that make sense and sound normal to me often require further explanation to be legible for other English speakers. It took me almost three years from signing the translation agreement to produce a completed draft of the translated manuscript. This long delay was in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also had to do with the difficulty of the task itself. When I submitted a first sample section to my editor at the University of Michigan Press, she described it as basically unreadable (though in slightly kinder terms). I was trying so hard to remain faithful to Xu's original formulations and terminology that the resulting English text sounded incredibly unnatural and made little sense for most readers outside of Chinese dance studies. Without changing the content, I tried very hard to edit the language to make it enjoyable to read (or at least comprehensible) while remaining as true as possible to Xu's original. I broke up longer sentences into shorter ones and rearranged the order of clauses to better fit English writing conventions. When direct quotations from other scholars were used in the text, I added the name of the author or source for clarity. In general, I tried to select words and phrases that make sense and sound natural to English readers while still conveying the specificity of the Chinese dance discourse. I am not convinced that the book is "beautiful to read," which is what my editor requested. I do, however, feel that I remained as close as I could to Xu's original ideas and arguments. I think it is these ideas and arguments that make the book worth reading.

As discussed above, *Creating with Roots* makes important contributions

by clarifying the definition of Chinese national folk dance and explaining its relationship both to longer histories of performance practice in China and to dance genres and ideas in other parts of the world. Reflecting a practice that is common in Chinese-language dance scholarship, Xu sometimes makes general statements about “the West” and “Western dance” to formulate his ideas and arguments about Chinese national folk dance. In many places, Xu clarifies these terms to refer to, for example, specific countries, linguistic communities, dance traditions, and historical contexts. In these cases, Xu brings more of the critical and nuanced approach to notions of “the West” and “Western dance” that one would expect today in English-language dance writing. At other times, however, Xu makes more generic usage of these terms, treating them uncritically and without specificity, in ways that some readers familiar with current English-language scholarship might find overly simplistic. At these times, readers may remember that this book is a scholarly work produced in an academic environment that has its own conventions and histories, which are often different from those of English-language dance writing. There are other ways in which Xu’s analysis does not always conform to what readers based in English-speaking academia might expect based on their own training and writing habits. Readers may detect in Xu’s writing what feels like a romanticizing tone in discussions of rural culture, folk customs, traditional heritage, and labor. Readers may also be uncomfortable with frank hierarchies that set up concert dance choreography as more “refined” or “developed” than community folk practices. Even the notion that dances of non-Han groups in China are all “Chinese” may be challenging to some readers who are more familiar with the narratives about China’s internal ethnic politics commonly circulated in English-language discourse. When experiencing these reactions, I would encourage readers to remember that part of the power of translation is that it allows one to engage with scholarly work and ways of thinking and writing that exist outside one’s own immediate discursive community. I believe anyone reading *Creating with Roots* will see that Xu clearly has a profound respect for folk performance, rural and traditional cultures, and non-Han communities in China. In fact, I think it is his profound respect for these cultures and communities that makes Xu such a passionate advocate for Chinese national folk dance. The idea of “cultural self-consciousness” that Xu calls for at the end of the book is, in my understanding, a call to recognize and reinforce the value of these cultural practices and the people who maintain them. Xu’s position at the Beijing Dance Academy, an elite professional dance conser-

vatory, naturally shapes his ideas and his relationship to other dance communities in China. While no book can consider all viewpoints, I feel that Xu's discussions, though informed by his own positionality and experiences, reflect broad issues relevant to Chinese national folk dance beyond a single institution. I have chosen not to censor Xu's language to make it conform to English readers' expectations for what is "correct" or "appropriate" by the standards and conventions of English-language academic dance writing. Rather, I hope that readers will be willing to engage with the substance of Xu's arguments and recognize that he is writing in a specific cultural and political context, which may be quite different from their own.

*Creating with Roots* is part academic study and part artistic manifesto. In this sense, some of Xu's most important contributions in the book are his theoretical interventions from the point of view of normative approaches to national folk dance choreography. In other words, he is invested in a particular vision of the future of Chinese national folk dance, and he uses his interpretations of Chinese national folk dance concepts, choreography, and history to build a case for this future. Xu's view of Chinese national folk dance is one in which the inheritance of cultural traditions and the pursuit of artistic innovation are able to coexist within a single dance genre. At the same time, he believes it is important to find a balance between the two sides. Throughout the book, Xu is unequivocal in his affirmation of the creative impulse of Chinese national folk dance choreographers. He repeatedly and explicitly defends choreographers' right to reinterpret folk material through their own innovative reimagining and reconstruction onstage and in conservatory dance classrooms. He also argues that this creative impulse is important for the development of the genre as an artistic practice. At the same time, Xu also cites examples in which he feels that such reinterpretation has, in his view, gone too far. In these cases, he argues, excessive reinterpretation of folk material causes the artistic and cultural integrity of the choreographic work and the genre as a whole to be compromised. Xu's idea of "cultural self-consciousness" is a kind of self-reflexive capacity to find this balance. Xu sometimes explains this idea through the metaphor of a living tree. Here, cultural self-consciousness refers to the ability to understand where the root of cultural inheritance lies and to maintain this rootedness while allowing the tree to grow. One needs to maintain the threshold between appropriate and excessive amounts of cultural hybridization and creative interpretation so that the tree grows but the root is not pulled out. The title of the book, *Creating with Roots*, refers to this process.

Xu takes a historically contextualized view of dance theory and argues that Chinese national folk dance choreographers have faced different challenges in different historical periods. Within this longer trajectory of historical change, Xu believes that China's embrace of the global market economy and the influx of dance forms from the United States in the 1980s created a particularly jarring turning point that generated unprecedented challenges for Chinese national folk dance choreographers. In the latter portion of the book, Xu takes up two major issues that he believes are both results of the drastic changes to China's dance field that occurred after these economic and social transformations during the 1980s. Specifically, these include how to manage the pressures of commercialization and how to navigate a globalized cultural environment in which Eurocentric aesthetics continue to dominate. The phrase "aesthetics and self-consciousness" in the original Chinese title of the book points to the author's central argument that the aesthetics of Chinese national folk dance choreography reflect the artist's cultural subjectivity. According to Xu, creators of Chinese national folk dance must cultivate a cultural positionality in which they reflect on the materials they are using in their work and accept a sense of cultural and artistic responsibility for the effects their work has on those materials, the cultural environments from which they come, and future generations. Xu wants Chinese national folk dance choreographers to have the freedom to innovate and interpret folk material in their own way. However, he also wants them to be self-aware and intentional about the decisions they make. Most importantly, he wants them to take responsibility for the effects their choices have on Chinese culture and society. Xu's engagement with the ethics of choreographic choices in difficult and complex situations makes *Creating with Roots* useful for readers beyond the field of Chinese dance studies. Readers of diverse backgrounds, including scholars, students, practitioners, and critics in a variety of fields, will find thought-provoking ideas in Xu's handling of these issues, which represent shared challenges for artistic and cultural communities around the world.

I will conclude this translator's introduction with some notes about practical issues. First, readers are reminded that Chinese name order is the reverse of English name order. Family name comes first. Xu Rui's family name is Xu; Jia Zuoguang's family name is Jia; Dai Ailian's family name is Dai; and so on. When using the family name to reference a Chinese choreographer or writer mentioned in this book, make sure to use the name that comes first. Second, Xu uses underlining in the text to highlight key

arguments and passages that summarize main ideas. I have reproduced the underlining here exactly as it is presented in the original text. Third, titles of dance works are notoriously difficult to translate. In many cases, different English translations exist for the same Chinese dance title, and there is no standardization or authoritative name list. For this reason, if readers are interested in searching online to try to find more images or videos of dance works referenced in this book, it will be most effective to search using the original Chinese title in Chinese characters, not the English translation. To facilitate such searching and cross-referencing, I have included the Chinese characters for all names of choreographers and dance works. When doing an internet search, it is often helpful to narrow searches by adding the Chinese word for “dance”—舞蹈—to the search.

Last, I would like to give a heartfelt thank you to everyone who contributed to the making of this project. I am sincerely grateful to Xu Rui for inviting me to produce the English translation of his book and for trusting me with the immense responsibility of rendering his ideas for English-speaking audiences. I am also grateful to my editor, Sara Cohen, at the University of Michigan Press for taking on this project and providing helpful guidance and feedback during the translation process. Chuen-Fung Wong also provided guidance on the translation of Uyghur music terminology. A grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange provided a summer research stipend that supported my completion of the initial translation. Generous support from the Fund for Historical Studies and the George F. Kennan Member Fund at the Institute for Advanced Study made possible a semester away from teaching, which allowed me to finish the final editing, translator's introduction, and preparation of the manuscript. The Shanghai Music Publishing House served as the author's agent and helped with the transfer of copyright for the English edition. A generous subvention from the Beijing Dance Academy made it possible to include color images.

Emily Wilcox  
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## Creating with Roots





## *Introduction*

# The Unique Cultural Phenomenon of Contemporary Chinese National Folk Dance

If we take staged choreography as our focal point to examine a kind of dance culture, while also radiating out across the vast space beyond the stage, we will discover that in all of China's dance cultures, not one has broader influence than contemporary Chinese national folk dance. "National folk dance" (*minzu minjian wudao* 民族民间舞蹈) deserves to be identified as an extremely important key term for any research on dance culture in contemporary China. Turning our gaze to the stage, we can find large numbers of exquisite works of dance art that not only are high in artistic quality but also have gained broad appeal; when we look at folk spaces, we will see the lively traditional dance cultures that remain vibrant in remote regions, as well as the most dynamic figures of national folk dance in urban music and dance. Onstage, national folk dance is one of the most predominant forms of Chinese concert dance, whose diverse cultural presentations are as colorful as blossoming flower gardens and whose high artistic refinement exudes the brilliance of shimmering jewels. Offstage, national folk dance is like a majestic and flourishing giant tree whose trunk is deeply rooted in the earth of traditional culture and whose branches and leaves breathe in the air of folk cultural life.

As a cultural phenomenon, national folk dance in contemporary China can no longer be simply categorized as either pure staged dance art or pure folk dance culture. It has straddled the two layers and neutralized both domains, becoming a living culture of Chinese traditional dance that is both inclusive and outward reaching. This is undoubtedly an expanded notion of "national folk dance," one that is relatively unique as a dance culture phenomenon in the global context. And, this distinctively expansive meaning of contemporary Chinese national folk dance is actually in large part a prod-

uct of the development of stage choreography. China's long-standing and robust national folk dance inheritance has preserved the memory of historical culture and allows us to trace back to tradition, while contemporary national folk dance stage choreography uses new methods to extend tradition, endowing national folk dance with new meanings. As a result, Chinese national folk dance choreography has become an indispensable subject in research on dance culture in contemporary China. This is the first book to situate contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography within a relatively macroscopic cultural field of vision and systematic historical trajectory, using dance works (possessing a clear form, beginning and end<sup>1</sup>), and especially creative dance choreographies for the stage as case studies, to interpret the current and historical development of its contemporary aesthetic transformations as well as its unique cultural value.<sup>2</sup>

From this, we can see that national folk dance followed its own distinctive developmental trajectory and has already become an exceedingly important component of Chinese traditional dance culture. This is especially true after the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), when China's classical dances transformed into the synthetic and small-scale stage art of Chinese indigenous theater (*xiqu* 戏曲) and took a subordinate role within this larger art form, producing to a certain extent a "break" in the historical transmission of traditional classical dances.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, national folk dance inheritance, which possesses a comparably more complete manifestation and path of transmission, has climbed the artistic stage as a "living fossil" that carries forward Chinese traditional dance culture and in some respects has become the paradigmatic dance art of contemporary times.

In China's history reaching back several thousand years, Chinese national folk dance is like a continuously flowing stream unbroken from beginning to end. Particularly during China's long feudal era, it added a glorious cultural tradition to the forest of world heritage and also produced the brilliant culture of Chinese national folk dance. These incomparably deep sedimented cultural traditions became the continuously renewing source for Chinese national folk dance. This forms a contrast to the historical development of the West. Because Chinese society carries this deep and long-standing cultural tradition, China did not establish a self-evolving modern industrial society and capitalist development early on like the West. As a result, in this relatively more insular traditional cultural environment, Chinese national folk dance was able to be preserved whole until the modern era, when the Western powers forcibly opened China's doors. Additionally, the main body

of Chinese traditional culture is a typical agrarian culture, and dance is no exception. From its very beginnings, China's national folk dance has been nourished and has grown within the atmosphere of agrarian culture. The self-sufficient and semi-isolated pattern of agrarian culture is quite stable, and this gave national folk dance culture a deeply rooted agrarian hue that would not easily fade. For this very reason, the powerful life force of several thousand years of traditional culture sustains the core of Chinese national folk dance. This has allowed the dance culture to tenaciously survive and continue despite enormous and violent historical disruptions and cultural calamities faced by China's modern society. China is also a typical multiethnic nation, and the differences among its many ethnic groups, geographic terrains, modes of production, and other environmental factors have led to the creation of distinct and separate spaces for the development of national folk dance culture. This has produced a diverse and unusually rich cultural inheritance. More importantly, China's many different nationality cultures have mutually influenced and permeated one another throughout history, collectively constructing a vast and profound greater Chinese culture that is unified but not homogeneous. This cultural distinctiveness has also made the cultural system of Chinese national folk dance into a highly flexible "container" that not only embraces dance content with varied characteristics but also is capable of integrating diverse dance cultures.

It could be said that the traditional culture of Chinese national folk dance possesses a very solid cultural core and at the same time has a flexible developmental structure, and this special cultural character has determined its extremely strong ability to survive and persist in modern times. Of course, the methods of survival and persistence have necessarily changed amid the massive transformations of the modern social environment. Faced with enormous historical transitions and ideological transformations brought by social development, as well as the strong influence of Western culture and massive changes to the socioeconomic foundation, Chinese national folk dance finds itself in a more open and fast-paced environment. This kind of transformation has an even greater impact in the traditional folk spaces in which it takes refuge in villages and mountain communities. Changes to traditional habitats have produced an internal need on the part of national folk dance to search out new paths of development. Yet, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party's cultural policy that took the people<sup>4</sup> as its core gave national folk dance a new belonging in socialist arts culture. This opened up a new space for the

continued development and aesthetic elevation of national folk dance on the artistic stage. The state's theoretical position clearly advocated a people's art vision of "coming from the masses and going to the masses," and in practice it also encouraged the inheritance and deployment of national folk traditional dance cultures. This directly impacted artists' conscious use of national folk dance as an important form of artistic expression. The stage choreography they created in this way became closely linked to "the people" and "the folk," while Chinese national folk dance that itself already belonged to "the people" and "the folk" used its own identity to extend onto the artistic stage, which greatly expanded its terrain.

Ultimately, the contemporary Chinese national folk dance that we see today has formed this type of pattern: it is grounded in a rich tradition of agrarian dance culture, is backed by China's core traditional cultural spirit and artistic ideas of the new era, and takes contemporary stage choreography as its method of expression and central activity. So, the contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography that we see is neither a museumified performance expression nor a completely transformed product of modern times. The traditional culture contained in it can be savored forever, while the diverse innovations that it develops bring pleasant surprises, possessing an open and embracing structure.

Of course, cultural transformation in a changing environment is a major challenge, and it is certainly not without difficulties. Chinese culture has gone through a series of major historical progressions: the dire consequences of a self-isolating feudal agrarian culture; the long-term chaos of the fight against imperialist invasion and the revolutionary civil war; the cultural autocracy of politics in command during the Cultural Revolution; the sudden cultural collision brought by the country's reform and opening up; the clamorous dust raising of Western cultural theories such as modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism; and the fierce assault of the great tide of the commercial market economy. Chinese national folk dance accompanied this progression and experienced a complicated transformation, which is clearly reflected in changes in the aesthetic expression of its stage choreography. At the start of the new century, following a strong trend in the general mood toward returning to traditional culture, Chinese national folk dance is taking a similar route to many other forms of traditional Chinese culture. That is, by reviewing and summarizing the lessons from several decades of experience, choreographers are attempting now to truly reconstruct a cultural system of one's own within a diverse and complex cultural context. In

this process, stage choreography of course plays an important role. For this reason, contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography represents this kind of complicated but representative cultural phenomenon and could even be said to reflect a microcosm of the contemporary transformation of Chinese society.

In fact, Chinese national folk dance choreography has always been a hot topic in explorations of contemporary dance culture in China. Thinking and debates around national folk dance choreography have been ubiquitous in the history of dance development in the People's Republic of China, appearing scattered through many historical documents and deeply impacting every aspect of research on national folk dance. Yet, for a dance form situated in such a complex environment, such dispersed discussions are insufficient to construct a systematic and complete understanding. The present study aims to build upon this research, but instead of focusing on any single position or stratum within the environment, it aims to examine the environment as a whole systematically from the outside. Taking a holistic perspective, it seeks to understand the complicated phenomena and relations among the different strata. For this purpose, this book makes significant use of the works and methods of choreoecology (*wudao shengtaixue* 舞蹈生态学). As a discipline that examines the relationships between dance and the natural and social environment, choreoecology of course takes dance as its primary research subject. Dance itself as the central object is located within the whole environment, with clearly delineated relationships to each different element of the environment, offering a holistic and clear methodology. It is important to note that choreoecology understands the ecological environment as an ecological "system" in which different layers are mutually interconnected and mutually affecting, not as a sweeping and primordial "total" environment. Also, choreoecology established a holistic and multifaceted research method, and this is a very important starting point for surveying and understanding the complicated environment that impacts national folk dance choreography. On the basis of this kind of methodology, this book offers a relatively complete and systematic review of the phenomenon of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography.

As a study of the relationship between this central object and the environment from the approach of choreoecology, the entry point for this research is concrete formal analysis of dance itself. This kind of formal analysis borrows from the findings of linguistics research not only to carry out a quantitative analysis of dance's external form but also to emphasize the

aesthetic expressive content that is essential for constructing a complete linguistic system. National folk dance choreography that is engaged in artistic expression is precisely a complete system of linguistic expression. It both possesses the inherited traditional external dance forms and emphasizes the aesthetic expression of meaning that is the essence of language. In this way, choreoecology offers a holistic methodology while also having a practical entry point. Thus, this book's methodological basis is grounded in the evidential analysis of Chinese national folk dance choreographic works at the level of the dance itself, while also placing the entire creative phenomenon into a holistic environment to carry out multidimensional analysis. In view of this, the arguments of this book mainly address the following issues:

First, this book clarifies the concept of Chinese national folk dance. For some time, the formulation of this concept has been incomplete and inconsistent, and various terms such as "folk dance" (*minjian wu* 民间舞), "national/ethnic dance" (*minzu wu* 民族舞), "folkloric dance" (*minsu wu* 民俗舞), and "national folk dance" (*minzu minjian wu* 民族民间舞) are frequently jumbled together. Even more importantly, there is often inconsistency in our understanding of the meanings of these different terminologies. It is imperative to note that in viewing these terminologies from different disciplinary perspectives, or by placing national folk dance into different cultural settings, different interpretations of the meanings will emerge. Moreover, because of the distinctiveness of contemporary Chinese national folk dance, we must also be aware of the specific meaning of this term within the Chinese context. This book offers comparison and analysis of representative concepts of national folk dance from within and outside China and takes up the most recent developments to review them in relation to one another. In the final analysis, I believe that Chinese national folk dance is a complicated, multilayered concept with Chinese characteristics. Moreover, there is collapsible and expandable flexibility between the various layers, which cannot be simply cut apart or separated from one another. They rather must mutually influence one another and blend together in constant communication, to form a complete system. Speaking specifically of the two key strata of the "folk" and the "stage," these two together form a positive commingling relationship, manifesting change within inheritance and innovation within interaction. This means that the concept of Chinese national folk dance is not one that rigidly adheres to tradition but instead has become a contemporary idea with great tension and dynamism. It is also a concept possessing China's own cultural characteristics and values. Gaining a new understand-

ing of the concept of Chinese national folk dance offers a theoretical foundation for China's contemporary national folk dance development.

Second, this book offers a systematic case study analysis (*yangben fenxi* 样本分析) of works of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography. Because stage choreography has already become a key cultural phenomenon of contemporary Chinese national folk dance, the aesthetic transformation of stage choreography is a prominent indicator of the complex evolution of Chinese national folk dance. As a result, this book centers its research on a case study analysis of works of contemporary choreography. Just as its name implies, case study analysis is not a completely encompassing historical review but rather a selection of especially representative or influential works from different periods to serve as representative samples. The analysis of these sample works reflects the historical trajectory of contemporary Chinese national folk dance's aesthetic transformations in the context of different time periods. This kind of analysis, of course, is not a comprehensive appreciation of the works that attends to every aspect of a dance piece, nor is it a review based on personal experience and impressions. Instead, it is an analysis of the aesthetics and phenomena that extends deeper into national folk dance itself and its entire cultural background. Case study analysis is one of the basic research methods of choreoecology, and this book in total selects thirty-seven sample dance works, covering a time period from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century. This book's analysis of case studies emphasizes a spirit of concrete evidence, selecting representative works that have stood the test of time and carrying out fresh and lively discussion on the true basis of history. In other words, it does its best to objectively return to the original form of the dance work and to persist in "discussing dance on the basis of dance." Additionally, this book especially highlights the fact that, in the field of national folk dance choreography, great complexity characterizes the element of the "dance body" (*wu ti* 舞体)—here meaning the group of dancing subjects who live in the same cultural environment and share the same dance form, who through their study and transmission create and develop this dance form.<sup>5</sup> Because it crosses the two strata of the folk and the stage, contemporary national folk dance developed through the "joining forces" of the functions of two dance bodies. On the one hand, there are the common people who possess and naturally inherit national folk dance. On the other hand, there are the artists who create national folk dance choreography. Of course, the artists have the most direct influence on national folk dance choreography. The dance



body made up of the common people and other elements of society generates influence by way of the dance body made up of the artists. Therefore, the enormous initiative of the artists to a large extent determines the formal transformation of national folk dance's stage presentation. As the cultural background of the dance body, the artists attract significant attention and become a focal point. Based on this kind of case study analysis, we can track the relationship between national folk dance choreography and its environment through the aesthetic form of its choreography. From this, we can then sketch out a clear path of the development of China's contemporary national folk dance choreography, offering a reliable basis for research.

Third, this book moves beyond the limits of the experience-based professional field to closely examine the transformation of the aesthetics of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography within a larger historical cultural environment. Having one's thinking closed within the professional dance field and lacking a wider view of cultural developments outside dance can lead to a lack of agency and consciousness regarding the development of one's own cultural construction. Contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography does not exist only within the professional dance field and, in fact, cannot exist alone separate from the cultural environment. Not having a clear understanding of the relationship between dance and the cultural environment beyond the professional dance field will cause one's cultural structure to be limited and cultural development to lag. As a cultural phenomenon that moves back and forth between the traditional and the modern, contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography deeply feels the influence of China's modernization process and the world's globalization. The modernization process of Chinese culture was not a self-initiated process of one's own society but instead a forced response to the confrontation of the West's modern culture. When we faced the contrast between the West's social modernization process and the backwardness of our own social development, culturally it was difficult to avoid getting caught in the problem of Western-centric thought. Because Chinese national folk dance preserved the historical remains of traditional agrarian culture, it faced an even more extreme cultural gap. Yet, Chinese national folk dance contains a durable cultural core, and by maintaining the root of tradition and following reflection and exchange around cultural diversity within globalization, we are able to experience more the value of our own cultural traditions. As a result, the complex meaning and unique styles of Chinese national folk dance choreography precisely reflect the complex and

changing contemporary Chinese cultural environment, as well as the great vitality of Chinese cultural tradition. We should firmly stand on the basic principle of our own subjectivity and from a globalized perspective interpret the cultural significance of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography: that is, we should arrive at a conscious understanding of the rift between the traditional and the modern and the cultural differences between East and West.

Finally, based on analysis and reflection, this book aims to develop a systematic and complete understanding of the cultural phenomenon of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography. At the start of the new century, both China and Chinese culture face new development. Chinese national folk dance choreography also needs to arrive at an even higher cultural consciousness on the basis of a clear self-knowledge. It also must put forth a strategic reflection regarding one's own development, and this strategic reflection should possess the qualities of both a review and a forecast. As a contemporary Chinese cultural construct of the superstructure, under the pressure of history's winding paths and a period of economic construction, Chinese national folk dance choreography has not truly been established and developed. Confusion of the traditional and the modern, of East and West, and of the tidal wave of the commodity economy has long troubled China's cultural construction. The instability of societal growth between China and developed countries and the instability in the internal development within Chinese society have both caused China's national folk dance choreography to manifest a pattern of drops in the level and the diversity of different scales. Even so, the great integrative capacity and traditional cultural spirit of Chinese civilization also formed a unified root pulse and from this constructed a cultural system with "unity in diversity" (*duoyuan yiti* 多元一体). At the start of the new century, amid the loss of looking back and the anticipation of looking forward, Chinese culture is forging ahead toward a newly rebuilt self-confidence and excitement. As a cultural type that connects the traditional to the modern, a mixed body that blends East and West, and an artistic form linked to the spirit and the soul, contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography is an important constituent part of China's contemporary cultural construction regardless of the perspective from which it is viewed. It should face contemporary realities and the future to formulate a genuine Chinese dance form that possesses contemporary significance. Of course, this will be a very slow process that advances gradually. It is essential to keep in mind that Chinese national folk

dance choreography takes dance culture that originates with the people and the folk and distills it onto the artistic stage. It also blends stage choreography with the mass culture of the people, to form a socialist mode of culture and art with clear Chinese characteristics. Understanding this important cultural meaning is an extremely important topic of research for clarifying the progress, value, and future direction of Chinese national folk dance culture in the new era.

Feng Youlan 冯友兰 once wrote, "In the philosophy of any nationality or period, there is always a part that only has value relative to the economic conditions of that nationality or period. But there is always another part whose value exceeds this. The non-relative part has enduring value."<sup>6</sup> I believe that this point has widespread relevance regarding Chinese traditional culture as well. The various concepts promoted widely in China during the new century, such as "harmonious society" and "taking the people as the foundation," are not new things that emerged out of thin air. Aren't they all newly interpreted elements found in China's traditional culture that have relevance to today's society? The traditional culture of national folk dance is also like this; it also has enduring and changeable elements. From the perspective of choreoecology, those enduring elements will have a lasting value and be selected by society and the people, while those changeable components, along with the times and the environment, will not be selected by society and the people and will thus be eliminated. Surely, this is a kind of choice, and regarding Chinese national folk dance choreography, it is an even more conscious choice. This kind of conscious choice also necessarily has a special meaning in the new era.

## CHAPTER I

# *The Concept of Chinese National Folk Dance and the Research Background of Contemporary Choreographic Aesthetics*

### I.1. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF CHINESE NATIONAL FOLK DANCE

It should be said that in China national folk dance is a very complex concept, even to the point that the concept itself brings up many complicated cultural ideas and phenomena related to dance in China. Our common understanding of this concept is not limited to the various national folk dances that naturally circulate among the folk but also includes professionalized dance training and concert dance choreography refined and created on the basis of national folk dances. Therefore, the first task of researching Chinese national folk dance choreography is to clarify the concept of Chinese national folk dance. In other words, research on contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography should have a relatively systematic and clear theoretical viewpoint. From the history of the development of this concept, its process contains swings, repetition, and uncertainty. Of course, before the concept of national folk dance emerged, the most commonly used concept was still folk dance.

#### I.1.1. Historical Understandings and Western Understandings

When we turn our view to China's distant dance history, we will find that actually very early on there was a conceptual distinction between the music and dance of the folk and the music and dance of the court that represents classical dance. The early concept of "music" (*yue* 乐) combined poetry, music, and dance into a synthetic artistic form. As the brilliant starting

point for the history of Chinese poetry, the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 诗经) most likely was produced from the early period of the Western Zhou to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period and is China's first compendium of poems and songs. Actually, the poems in the *Book of Odes* were all song lyrics that could be sung. According to the character of the musical tunes it was matched with, the *Book of Odes* was divided into three categories: ballads (*feng* 风), dynastic hymns (*ya* 雅), and eulogies (*song* 颂). The category "ballads" refers to state styles, meaning the musical tunes of each marquisate or territory; most of them are folk songs. The meaning of "ballads" here is key or melody; the ancients' so-called *Qin Ballads*, *Wei Ballads*, and *Zheng Ballads* are much like today's Shaanxi tunes, Shanxi tunes, Henan tunes, and so forth. "Dynastic hymns" are basically the works of aristocrats, and only a small part are from the folk. The category "Dynastic hymns" means orthodox. People of the Zhou Dynasty called the orthodox sound refined music, and it carried a tone of veneration. "Eulogies" were the music and songs used in rituals to royal ancestral shrines. Although the *Book of Odes* doesn't touch on specific dances, from the demarcation of ballads, dynastic hymns, and eulogies in the collection of poems, we can see the different levels of understanding of "music" in early China. As a single category, "ballads" basically represented a kind of "folk style" (*minjian zhi feng* 民间之风). This traditional understanding is very deeply rooted. Even today the term "collecting ballads/folk styles" (*caifeng* 采风)<sup>1</sup> continues this tradition in both name and meaning. This "ballad/folk style" also becomes the root of national folk dance.

The Zhou Dynasty's construction of rituals and music later divided the refined music (*yayue* 雅乐) of the orthodox sound from the rustic music (*suyue* 俗乐) of the folk styles. Because of the emphasis on "music and government are connected" (*yueyuzhengtong* 乐与政通), and as a result of the strict hierarchal ideals of the "hereditary estates and territorial lords" political system, the ritual music of the Zhou Dynasty in many ways embodies the music and dance ideas of the Confucian ethical code, in which "rites" (*li* 礼) come before "music" and "music" must be combined with "rites." "Rites" not only made "music" take on the function of political teachings but also established restrictions and boundaries for orthodoxy in "music." For example, when a senior official of the Ji family publicly used the emperor's rite of "eight-row dance formation at court" (*baiyiwu yu ting* 八佾舞于庭), Confucius became very angry and called out, "If this can be condoned, then what cannot!"<sup>2</sup> However, the refined music of the court and the rustic music

of folk were not actually this clearly distinguished, but rather developed through ups and downs and replacements amid constant mutual exchange. Moreover, folk music and dance always maintained a great vitality. For example, the famous “six generations dance” and “six small dances” of Zhou Dynasty ritual music were composed on the basis of folk dance. And during the Spring and Autumn Period the system of ritual music established by the Western Zhou to strengthen its control became increasingly rigid, and as the Western Zhou’s rule collapsed, there was a “collapse of rites and breakdown of music.” Refreshing and lively folk dances filled with burgeoning vitality quickly flourished. This was true to such an extent that the Marquis Wen of Wei would fall asleep when respectfully listening to ancient music but would listen with gusto to the folk music of the states of Zheng and Wei and never grow tired.<sup>3</sup> After this in the historical development of dance in China, we can clearly discover that these two lines run through from beginning to end: one is the court dance that serves as refined music, and the other is folk dance that serves as rustic music. However, what people commend is that between these two lines of “refined” and “rustic,” “court” and “wild,” there emerged a positive relationship of mutual interaction. Court dance and many other later forms of performance dance all originated in folk dance and in the long developmental process continuously drew experience from folk dance forms, absorbed their nutrients, and integrated folk dance elements. It can be said that folk dance is a wellspring that never dries up, and learning from folk dance is an important method and foundation for court dance and performance art dance. Of course, court dance, on the other hand, also influences folk dance. For example, after the fall of the Tang Dynasty, the palace artists wandered destitute among the folk, directly accelerating the post-Tang development of folk dance. The saying “when the rites die out, search in the outskirts” (*lishi qiu zhuyue* 礼失求诸野) also expresses the idea that court music and dance will continue a kind of special inheritance among the folk under specific historical conditions.

Moving into the modern era, the dance vocation turned a new glorious page. Especially under the direction of Comrade Mao Zedong’s 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and the Arts,” learning from the folk in Chinese dance reached a new peak. The “Talks” emphasized that only by coming from the masses and going to the masses, by deeply entering into the contemporary struggles to search for the wellspring of creation, and by remolding one’s thought and establishing a correct worldview could one create artistic works that the people love. The rapid development of the Yan’an

New Yangge movement was a product led by the spirit of the “Talks.” Many dance masters of modern China in their artistic practice independently inherited this method. “Coming from the folk and going to the folk” became their secret of success for creation, research, and development.

From this cursory account, we can at least gain a perception that the distinction between palace and outskirts, refined and rustic, in Chinese music and dance is not an absolute one, but rather one in which distinction and integration are mutually imbricated. In its own development, folk dance has always contained a tendency to reach toward the elite and unclear entanglements. China’s elite art dance did not develop into a single fixed form like classical ballet in the West. Rather, it always developed and changed under the nourishment of folk dance. This kind of interconnected relationship of beneficial mutual reliance and mutual influence between the two is extremely unique. Yu Ping 于平 interpreted this as the two poles of “folk customs” (*minsu* 民俗) and “refined scholars” (*yashi* 雅士): “In a cultural field with a shared temporality, ‘folk customs’ and ‘refined scholars’ are two opposing extremes; but from the perspective of a linear temporality, folk culture is always the harbinger of refined culture, and refined culture is the direction folk culture moves toward—whether it’s the folkloric dance ‘posing as a lover of culture’ or the refined scholar’s ‘catering to the ways of the world,’ the two not only complement each other but also interact with one another.”<sup>4</sup> Our examination of the concept of Chinese national folk dance should begin with attention to the historical understanding of this relationship between folk dance and elite dance art.

Apart from this, we should also take note of the West’s understanding and interpretation of national folk dance. *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* offers the following explanation of folk dance (*minjian wudao* 民间舞蹈):

Term denoting any kind of dance which has been developed within a traditional community, rather than being created by a choreographer or teacher. Steps and patterns are passed on from one generation to another, gradually undergoing change. Many folk dances have their origins in ritual—fertility, marriage, religious, or war—and express the character of the community who dance them. The term was coined in the 18th century to distinguish “peasant” dance forms from those of the upper classes, but the distinction itself dates back to the 15th century when ballroom dances first began to emerge as separate forms. In the past folk dances have exerted a strong influence on social and theatre dance, par-

ticularly during the Romantic period when they were considered to add both local and expressive colour. They have also influenced the styles of some 20th- and 21st-century choreographers. . . . However, with urbanization and demographic change many of the original dances have been lost, even though many Western countries, during the 20th century, attempted to re-discover and preserve these dances, often through specialist troupes of folk dancers. Even where they have survived, however, they are mostly staged as theatre or as tourist attractions rather than being performed as genuine community events.<sup>5</sup>

From this formulation, we can infer these points: (1) folk dance is fairly strictly assigned a concept of stratification; it not only signifies a distinction from the dances of elite society but also is distinguished from social dance and “created” dances; (2) folk dance has an important influence on elite social dances and theatrical dances; and (3) early folk dances face a danger of disappearing or changing their mode of existence, becoming theatrical or touristic stage performance.

However, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*, national dance (*minzu wudao* 民族舞蹈) is explained as a concept within character dance (*xingge wudao* 性格舞蹈). Character dance is “a wide ranging term, mostly used in ballet, to denote forms of dance which fall outside the category of classic-academic dance. It refers to the national dances that were prevalent in 19th-century ballets; also to folk, ethnic, and rustic dances. It is additionally used to describe choreography that specifically illustrates a character’s function or occupation (sailor, farmer, shoemaker) or choreography that is performed by older dancers or by dancers portraying older figures.”<sup>6</sup> Among these, “national dance” was very clearly assigned to what we are familiar with and what we call in ballet “representative dances” (*daibiaoxing wudao* 代表性舞蹈):

National dances (like Polish, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian, and Russian) are found in many 19th-century ballets where they are frequently performed as entertainments at court gatherings, and as such they provide a lively and exotic contrast to classical dancing.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we can see that in Western understanding, folk dance and national dance are two clearly separated concepts. Folk dance is dance that truly exists at the folk level, and early folk dances that exist as real social community activities are currently declining to the point of extinction. Those



folk dances that have been changed into a theatrical form have also not truly become stage choreography but rather continue to “subsist” in their original look through a new method. National dance, on the other hand, becomes true concert dance, through the reorganization and reworking of folk dance, polishing and accentuating its formal special qualities to express national “character” and in this way gain “representativeness.” However, what should be noted is that the “representativeness” of national dance represents the entire nation’s “lively image” and “exotic tone,” and it does not represent an image of individualized dance choreography. Additionally, national dance is a concept that emerges through a distinction from classical dance. Its diverse cultural hues form a clear contrast against the unified pattern of classical dance. Moreover, within the West’s concept of national dance, at a certain level because the geographic separation between the nationality (*minzu* 民族) and the country (*guojia* 国家) is not too great, the term “national” also encompasses the concept of the “country.” For example, Poland, Hungary, Spain, and Italy carry the connotation of both nationality and country. This is not totally compatible with the multinationality dance culture of China’s vast territory. Our country-level concept of the “national” is the large concept of the “Chinese nationality” (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族), but this has a relatively nonunified form and instead includes the dance culture of many different nationalities. And these so-called different nationalities (*minzu* 民族) are closer to the anthropological concept of “ethnic groups” (*zhongzu* 种族), including both the Han ethnicity that makes up the main body of the Chinese nation and “minority” (*shaoshu* 少数) nationalities. In many cases, we have not made a clear distinction between the larger concept of the country “nation” that takes Han culture as its core and the anthropological concept of the “nation” as ethnicity.

### 1.1.2. The Concept of Contemporary Chinese National Folk Dance

After looking at the historical clues and the Western situation, we can now once again turn our attention to contemporary China’s explanation of this concept of national folk dance and gain a new understanding. In the music and dance volume of the *Complete Encyclopedia of China*, “folk dance” (*minjian wudao* 民间舞蹈) is explained in this way:

Dance that originates and circulates among the folk, with a clear style, and is loved by the broad masses. It reflects the people’s labor, struggles,

social relations, and romantic life. Folk dances of different nationalities and territories have obvious differences in stylistic characteristics arising from the influences of lifestyle, historical tradition, customs, national character, religious beliefs, and even the natural environment of geography and climate. . . . Folk dance is the major source material for professional dance choreography. The court dances of feudal society in each country, the classical dances of each country and nationality, theatrical dance, and party dances have inseparable connections to folk dance. . . . Chinese opera dance (*xiqu wudao* 戏曲舞蹈) and new creative dance both absorbed large amounts of many kinds of folk dance.<sup>8</sup>

In this explanation, what appears first is a very pure concept of “folk dance”—dance that not only is born in the folk but also grows in the folk—but it offers more interpretation of the relationship between folk dance and professional dance. What should be noted is that in the explanation, although folk dance has different layers of relationships to various forms of elite dance, and although folk dance as a source material enters creative dance, this concept of folk dance does not become separated from the “folk” level, although it is still mixed with all kinds of elite and professional dance.

*China Dance Dictionary* gives the following explanation of “folk dance” (*minjian wu* 民间舞):

Folk dance: a kind of dance. A dance form that is collectively created, continuously accumulated, and developmentally formed by laboring people over a long historical process and that circulates widely among the broad masses. It reflects the life and struggles of the laboring people, as well as their aesthetic tastes, thoughts and feelings, hopes and desires, etc. Because the people of various nationalities and territories live and labor in different ways, with different historical-cultural attitudes and customs and in divergent ecological conditions, they have developed different national styles and geographical characteristics. In areas where folk dance is relatively rich and developed, because of the different individual character and technical levels of different folk performers, variations emerge within shared practices and each has distinct personal qualities.<sup>9</sup>

This explanation’s basic definition of folk dance diverges greatly from the other two definitions. It also clearly delineates that folk dance exists at the level of the “folk.” But in the later discussion, folk dance not only bears the broader aesthetic customs of the people and the nation, but also embodies

the micro-level of individual folk performers' distinct personality characteristics. The former implies that folk dance holds within it the higher cultural pursuits of an ethnic group, while the latter rather implies that folk dance contains the higher artistic pursuits of an individual.

Combining the explanations from these two dictionaries, the designation of China's concept of "folk dance" on the level of the "folk" is fairly clear. However, in its emphasis on the close connection between that concept and national arts and professional creation, folk dance bears even greater meaning. One thing that is clear is that whereas the Western dictionary provides separate explanations of "folk dance" and "national dance," neither of the two Chinese dance dictionaries features separate entries to explain the concept of "national dance." "National" became a sign and symbol subsumed into the "folk." The absence of a theoretical explanation in the dance dictionary means that whether in the realm of theory or practice, the application of these two ideas is somewhat ambiguous, turning into a complicated and multilayered concept.

In practice, surrounding the construction and development of national folk dance, people have many interpretations of this concept, but they almost all without exception believe that Chinese folk dance is definitely not a naive concept. A representative example is Lü Yisheng's 吕艺生 early "two kinds and three levels" argument about folk dance. The "two kinds" refer to participatory folk dance and performance-oriented folk dance, and the "three levels" refer to mass participatory dance in public squares; folk dance performed by folk artists, amateurs among the masses, and professional dancers in public squares or on stages; and theatricalized folk dance created by professional dance artists on the basis of folk dance source materials. Lü writes, "The so-called two kinds and three levels are today's offspring of folk dance; the combination of their various denotations is the comprehensive parent concept of folk dance."<sup>10</sup> The formulation of "two kinds and three levels" that employs a multilevel concept to view folk dance is quite desirable and meaningful, yet the division of levels appears somewhat overly demarcated. The "two kinds" of participatory and performance-oriented folk dance largely intersect and overlap; likewise, using groups of people (the dance body) and performance spaces as the main basis for categorization in the "three levels" relatively lacks flexibility.

Yu Ping's *Dance Morphology* offers a relatively systematic argument about Chinese folk dance, but it takes what the dance field collectively calls "folk dance" (*minjian wu* 民间舞) and changes this appellation to "folkloric

dance” (*minsu wu* 民俗舞). Regarding this, Yu Ping’s basic consideration is that “‘folkloric dance’ is not only the research object of dance studies but also of folklore studies. . . . In dance studies, calling this ‘folkloric dance’ instead of ‘folk dance’ helps with linking up to folklore studies and also aids with our interpretation of the historical cultural forms of Chinese folkloric dance.”<sup>11</sup> From the concept of folklore studies, folk dance has a deep connection with folk life, and the rich research results of the discipline of folklore studies greatly benefit research on folk dance culture. But, no matter what, from the perspective of folklore studies, the name “folkloric dance” is actually closer to the level of folk customs, and it has significant distance from folk dance that has been elevated to the level of the stage. Even though Yu Ping says that Chinese folkloric dance and Chinese folk dance are not clearly distinguished terms, by using the term “folkloric dance” to express attention to folk customs, he acknowledges the “contemporary transformation” of Chinese folkloric dance forms. In his view, this transformation constitutes a change in the original ecology folkloric dance (*yuanshengtai minsu wu* 原生态民俗舞) brought about by the conscious participation of professional dancers. Yu Ping writes,

Original ecology folkloric dance is what we commonly call folkloric dance of the “public square” (*guangchang* 广场) and the “threshing ground” (*changmian* 场面). When it entered urban performance spaces—the theater, it turned into a “theatrical” folkloric dance that exists for the stage; moreover, with the establishment of professional dance schools, folkloric dance’s organic inheritance turned into conscious instruction—the principle of standardized teaching materials brought about the emergence of a kind of “academic” (*xueyuan* 学院) folkloric dance. Put another way, “academic folkloric dance” and “theatrical folkloric dance” are the contemporary transformed forms of original ecology “folkloric dance of the threshing grounds.”<sup>12</sup>

From this passage, we can clearly see that regardless of whether one uses the term “Chinese folkloric dance” or “Chinese folk dance,” the connotation of this concept in the contemporary period always undergoes significant change, becoming a complex, multilayered notion. In this situation, we tend to see “folkloric dance” as an originally naive concept really tied to folklore studies that is entirely limited to the realm of the folk and folk customs and that is separate from teaching and choreography. Once a kind of dance has

become separated from the level of folk and folk customs, we no longer use the term “folkloric dance.”

However, regarding “contemporary transformation,” Yu Ping’s argument points out a reality that has taken place, especially when referring to pedagogical and choreographic practices of academy-style folk dance (*xueyuanpai minjian wu* 学院派民间舞). As the birthplace of dance education in new China, the Beijing Dance School’s establishment of the Chinese national folk dance discipline has a close connection with the history of contemporary usage of the concept of folk dance. Starting with the Beijing Dance Academy’s previous incarnation, the Beijing Dance School, Chinese dance (*Zhongguo wu* 中国舞) initially did not strictly separate Chinese classical dance from Chinese folk dance. Instead, on the one hand, it recreated a contemporary Chinese classical dance system on the foundation of Chinese opera (*xiqu* 戏曲) and ballet, and, on the other hand, it studied traditional folk dances from the folk. The first time the Beijing Dance School divided into professional disciplines, it just separated the students already at the school into the two disciplines of national dance and ballet, and the instructors’ professional departments accordingly were divided into the Department of National Dance Drama (*minzu wuju ke* 民族舞剧科) and the Department of European Ballet Dance Drama (*Ouzhou balei wuju ke* 欧洲芭蕾舞剧科). This was a very clear method of dividing the Chinese and Western dance systems into two. After the Beijing Dance School became the Beijing Dance Academy, the departments were initially divided by major and not by dance style, for example, the pedagogy department and the performance department, with Chinese dance and ballet programs established under each according to dance style. It was only later that the Beijing Dance Academy changed to a system of arranging departments according to discipline based on dance style, establishing the Chinese dance department and the ballet department. In 1987, the Chinese dance department formally split into two parts, establishing the Department of National Dance Drama and the Department of Chinese Folk Dance. Actually, these two departments corresponded to Chinese classical dance and Chinese folk dance. From the perspective of the development process of this teaching system, Chinese national folk dance did not appear as a clear and independent system from the beginning but instead gradually peeled off amid continuous development. This situation is closely related to China’s early understanding of folk dance. At that time, people often saw folk dance as a “subordinate” to classical dance. Just as the contemporary reconstruction of the Chinese classical

dance system was deeply influenced by the Western ballet system, the relationship of the categorization of Chinese classical dance and Chinese folk dance similarly shows this influence. In another essay, Yu Ping writes, "The firm establishment of Chinese classical dance and Chinese folk dance as two 'kinds' of traditional dance actually is a projection of classical ballet and its subordinate character dance."<sup>13</sup> Because character dance is folk dance that has been reformed under the ballet aesthetic, its concept and meaning both underwent change. Under this influence, Chinese folk dance was already no longer a naive concept of the folk.

Therefore, it can be said that in China's contemporary dance pedagogy system, although Chinese folk dance used the name "folk dance," in fact it floated between "folk dance" and "national dance." Chinese folk dance from the beginning implied the concepts of "character dance" and "national dance" in their Western understandings, and it was not "folk" dance in the naive sense. Because the establishment of Chinese classical dance was deeply influenced by the model of Western ballet, not only did it learn from ballet's training schema, but it also at the same time accepted ballet's large-scale dance drama performance model. That is why at the time the Beijing Dance School's departments and majors were divided into the "Department of National Dance Drama" and the "Department of European Ballet Dance Drama," and after the transition to a university, the founding name of the Chinese classical dance department was the "Department of Chinese National Dance Drama" (*Zhongguo minzu wuju xi* 中国民族舞剧系). At the time the goal of the department was to cultivate top-notch performers for national dance dramas. The so-called national dance drama is actually a blend of balletified Chinese classical dance and character-ized Chinese folk dance. However, while the contemporary system of Chinese classical dance was still not mature, Chinese folk dance was not like ballet's character dance that had been reformed to fit a single aesthetic principle. It was instead more influenced by the stagified folk dances of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and after being moved onto the stage they still maintained their own diverse essential styles. It was in this very structure that the Department of Chinese Folk Dance went from being "subordinate" to being established as "independent." From this process, we can see that this gap between name and meaning led Chinese folk dance to transform into a complex concept. The process of interpreting this concept turned into one of understanding and construction anew.

Taking the Beijing Dance Academy's folk dance academic program as

a typical example, the concept of folk dance was further complicated into three layers: original folk dance (public square); pedagogical folk dance (classroom); and creative folk dance (stage). However, the discipline's understanding of Chinese folk dance did not stop at these three distinctions but arrived at an even deeper understanding, forming the concept of "broad folk dance" (*hongguan minjian wu* 宏观民间舞) that encompassed all three levels mentioned above. As explained by former Beijing Dance Academy vice dean Ming Wenjun 明文军, "National folk dance is a spiritual collective body that combines feelings, ideas, beliefs, and culture. Its many forms possess a national character (*minzuxing* 民族性) and value that are 'integrated' (*zhenghe* 整合) into one."<sup>14</sup> It is precisely on this foundation of understanding that national folk dance becomes a "broad folk dance" that is capable of straddling the traditional and the modern, the refined and the rustic, and thereby finds a relationship of logical progression from "public square" to "classroom" to "stage." In its promotion of "national character," the concept of "broad folk dance" actually emphasized folk dance's inclusiveness and expansiveness. So, after this, the concept of folk dance at the Beijing Dance Academy eventually turned into, in Ming's words, "a kind of dance that takes folkloric dance as its foundation and gradually becomes a cultural model possessing the connotation of national 'representativeness' and a clear pathway for development."<sup>15</sup> Within this kind of understanding, we can clearly see the tendency to integrate and sublimate "folk dance" using the concept of the "nation." This kind of broad folk dance also gradually became designated as "academy-style" national folk dance.

Supporting this theoretical formulation are the long-standing practices of academy-style national folk dance in teaching and choreography. An especially important component of this is the practical methodology represented by "basic element pedagogy" (*yuansu jiaoxuefa* 元素教学法), which refines basic elements to strengthen the movement style and thereby construct national folk dance in the broad sense. The influence of this method not only comes from its use in teaching but also extends to the realm of creation. Former Beijing Dance Academy national folk dance professors Pan Zhitao 潘志涛 and Zhao Tiechun 赵铁春 write, "We can not only extract typical movements but also take them as basic elements, then draw inferences and comprehend by analogy to 'reconstruct' (*chonggou* 重构) a kind of folk dance with traditional spirit and 'paradigmatic' (*dianfan* 典范) significance."<sup>16</sup> Through concepts such as "basic element," "reconstruct," and "paradigm," academy-style national folk dance already presents a relatively complete system of theory and practice; these key terms sketch for us the essence

of academy-style national folk dance. It is newly created in the practical process of structuring and reconstructing, a paradigmatic “folk dance culture” that has already entered the contemporary system of “refined music” (*yayue* 雅乐) but has also not completely separated from the root of folk customs. In 2001, Beijing Dance Academy’s Chinese folk dance department formally changed its name to the Department of National Folk Dance, thereby completing the transformation process from blurred “Chinese dance” to out of place “Chinese folk dance” to paradigmatic “Chinese national folk dance.” Whether in pedagogy or choreography, paradigmatic national folk dance that possesses traditional spirit actually already has very strong professionalism. From this, it is separated from the level of folk dance culture. Because they are linguistically similar, we have to be especially careful about confusing two different concepts: the “folk dance” of the original “spring” and the “national folk dance” of the contemporary “flowing water.” Although the two mutually influence one another, they occupy different levels.

For an academy that takes teaching as its responsibility, emphasizing systematic pedagogy that elevates national folk dance and working hard to connect it to both the original and choreographic contexts to form an integrated whole are well-reasoned efforts. But clearly national folk dance does not exist only in the academic environment; it actually finds itself in an even broader and more complex social environment. Our understanding of it, then, naturally cannot be limited to a pedagogy-focused standpoint. Rather, from Pan and Zhao’s discussion we can at least see the following: (1) the concept of Chinese national folk dance has already exceeded simple notions of “nation” or “folk” and instead has a relatively richer connotation; (2) Chinese national folk dance becomes a composite concept, one that uses “nation” to renovate and refine the concept of “folk,” complicating its meaning; and (3) as a multilayered composite concept, national folk dance choreography is one layer among many that are closely interrelated. Placing these understandings into the theoretical perspective of Zi Huayun’s 资华筠 *Choreoecology* provides an even clearer presentation and broader field of vision. *Choreoecology* in its disciplinary definition states:

Choreoecology is a discipline that researches dance’s relationship to nature and the social environment. It takes dance—as its core object—situated in a system of mutual relationality and mutual functionality and carries out broad, multidimensional and comprehensive investigations, determining which among the many elements of nature or society influence or condition dance, as well as which methods they use and to what



level they influence and condition the emergence, development, and expressive forms of dance. Through this kind of examination, it hopes to provide explanations for numerous and complicated dance phenomena and reveal dance's innate patterns.<sup>17</sup>

As a comprehensive methodology, *Choreoecology* designed a broad and multidimensional approach for investigating dance in ecological environments. In 1994, it entered the book list of the New York Center for International Humanities exchange. Prominent US scholar of Chinese culture Dr. David Wu gave this review: "It uses linguistics methods and mathematical measuring methods in dance research, pursuing the feasibility of accurately conveying imagery. It is a representative work of China's contemporary material rational art theory. It broadly reveals the social and humanistic reasons for the special character of national dance art and differences within dance. It intersects and collaborates across three disciplines."<sup>18</sup> Borrowing from the methods of ecology, linguistics, and mathematical measurement, choreoecology provided a broad methodological approach to research the distinct artistic character and differences of national dances, grounded in an accurate expression of dance form. Attention to basic questions such as special character and difference means that, in the words of Zi Huayun, choreoecological research "must first address dances that spread naturally, while at the same time understanding clearly that dance is a multilayered concept with an interface that expands and contracts."<sup>19</sup> Naturally spreading and typical forms of national folk dance are an important object of study in choreoecology. Putting forward the scientific formulation of "a multilayered concept with an interface that expands and contracts" was especially meaningful, as it provided a very clear and succinct, as well as scientific and systematic, theoretical framework and perspective for investigating naturally spreading national folk dances. It employs a dynamic view to avoid a one-sided and simplistic understanding of the concept of national folk dance.

At an academic symposium on Chinese national folk dance held in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Beijing Dance Academy, Zi Huayun gave a comprehensive elaboration of the concept of national folk dance:

The birth and development of (national folk dance) is closely connected to a location's natural and human environment. Over time it becomes a dance form possessed by the local ethnic groups that has specific cultural

connotations and formal characteristics and naturally spreads among the folk. Therefore, what we commonly call “national folk dance” should possess the basic conditions of distinctiveness of national culture, vivid stylistic formal properties, be the property of a specific “dance body” (community), and for the most part spread naturally among the masses. Internationally (or in Western scholars’ investigations), “national” and “folk” are typically concepts of different standing. “Ethnic dance”<sup>20</sup>—is a definition with meaning in anthropology, while “folk dance”<sup>21</sup> is a definition with meaning in folklore studies. The former is generally divided into two levels—what spreads naturally in the folk; and staged choreographies that are reworked or recreated (*zai chuangzao* 再创造) on this foundation. Meanwhile, “folk” usually refers to dances in their original forms that accompany folk customs.

This comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the concept of national folk dance takes a choreoecological approach as its point of departure, placing national folk dance into a broader ecological environment that is multilayered with flexible interfaces: having national character (distinctiveness of national culture, vivid stylistic formal properties), folkloric character (naturally spreads in the folk), and creativity (stage choreography). It also mentions the designated community of inheritance (dance body) and the distinctions and connections between Chinese and foreign concepts of national folk dance, clearly defining the essential constitutive factors and different levels of national folk dance. Especially worth noting is that regarding the concept of ethnic dance (*minzu wu* 民族舞), it distinguishes between the anthropological notion of the *minzu* (ethnic<sup>22</sup>) and the political notion of the *minzu* (national<sup>23</sup>). From this perspective, our early “national dance dramas” actually lean more toward the “national,”<sup>24</sup> meaning that they carry the larger national concept that signifies the country and politics, while today’s “national folk dance” clearly leans more toward the “ethnic,”<sup>25</sup> meaning that it carries a racialized notion of various nationalities. On this basis, then, it places folk dance more clearly on the level of original ecology and folk customs.

In fact, the emergence of the concept of Chinese national folk dance occurred in large part to resolve the debate over the “authenticity” (*zhenwei* 真伪) of folk dance. We elevated actual folk dance to the professional field and the stage, causing it to peel away from the folk ecology and gradually form a new and self-sufficient system of inheritance within professional

teaching and stage performance. We can even postulate that when original ecology folk dance in the contemporary environment gradually modifies or even disappears, this system can independently go on operating. Therefore, this is a system that became separated from what naturally is inherited in the folk, and in its self-sufficient development it necessarily will form its own mechanism of inheritance. On a certain level, it will uncontrollably turn away from the original dance form, giving rise to debates over whether it “is” or “is not,” and it will be difficult to continue naming it with the concept of folk dance. Now it is increasingly common that we use this concept of Chinese national folk dance to combine “national dance” and “folk dance.” On the one hand, this rescued us discursively from the controversy of where folk dance belongs. Yet, on the other hand, our interpretation and understanding of its significance and connotations did not lose their importance because of this change in name. Just as when a person changes their name they are still themselves, national folk dance by another name still cannot avoid recognizing its true connotation, and it still cannot avoid the core problem of its relationship to true folk dance. We made a wide circle just to return to the point of departure for our cognition. Yet, the depth of our understanding is not where it was when we started.

Ultimately, the change in name had a benefit; that is, this new integrated concept of Chinese national folk dance can be directly analyzed from the point of view of its wording. In other words, what is the grammatical relationship in Chinese between the two terms “national” and “folk”? There are most likely only three possibilities: if it is a relationship of juxtaposition, then this indicates that national and folk are two different kinds of dance placed side by side; if it is a relationship of apposition, then the same kind of dance has names from two different perspectives, national and folk; if it is a modifier relationship, then “national” is qualifying and describing folk dance. The first two kinds of relationships clearly do not hold up. I’m willing to make the slightly forced interpretation that it is a modifier relationship: this is a concept that uses “national” to qualify and elevate the concept of “folk.” Between the two words “national” and “folk,” there should be a linking grammatical particle—*de* 的, meaning “nationalized folk dance.” In this modifier structure, “folk” is still the central term, but its character has undergone change. This not only shows the intermingled relationship between the two terms within national folk dance but also clearly demarcates the two different levels of “source” and “flow.”

## I.2. THE SUBJECT AND SCOPE OF RESEARCH ON CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NATIONAL FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY AESTHETICS

This book focuses on Chinese national folk dance as choreography. Here, compared to Chinese national folk dance in its other forms, the insertion of individual artistic creativity produces a vacillating feeling of distance from tradition, and because of this it has relatively more diversity and complexity and is more open and flexible in its formal qualities and cultural connotations. But the choreography level of national folk dance has connections and impacts that cannot be separated from the other levels. Also, Chinese national folk dance choreography provides strong practical meaning and guidance for the development of this traditional dance culture from the perspective of cultural creation and aesthetic refinement. This is especially true in an ecological environment in which the inheritance of Chinese folk dance in contemporary times faces more complex and rapid change each day. Along with the quickening advancement of modern industry and cities, as well as the intense contradictions and intermingling of different cultures, Chinese national folk dance, which took root in the soil of farming culture, faces a certain crisis of inheritance on the level of authentic folk dance. This places national folk dance choreography in a more dominant position in relation to the problem of inheriting traditional aesthetics. It can also be said that the transformation of the contemporary ecological environment gives the new period of national folk dance development a challenge and an opportunity. Meanwhile, national folk dance choreography is also changing with the times. The representative works of national folk dance in the early period of post-1949 China and the representative works of today clearly present different aesthetic tendencies, reflecting enormous transformations in the mutual influence and use of dance and the ecological environment. Therefore, in the rich development of national folk dance choreography, there are both leaps and crises. However, against this backdrop, we still lack a rational reflection on and sorting out of the developmental process of Chinese national folk dance choreography, and promotion of the aesthetic pursuits of national folk dance in the new era is still not clear enough. Many artists desire the free expression of stage creation in the new era, and there has been a gradual weakening in the understanding and inheritance of the special qualities of traditional aesthetics. There even appeared a tendency

toward artistic pursuits and the separation of stage choreography from folk traditions. This situation resulted in the complexity of the phenomenon of Chinese national folk dance choreography, which not only lacks a clear conceptual definition and explanation but also falls into endless disputes over the aesthetic direction of its choreography.

The passing on of national folk dance, as an intangible traditional culture, is in some ways like genetic inheritance, with one part inborn and another gained after birth. From this perspective, we need to deeply reflect on the position and direction of national folk dance choreography. If our seizure of folk dance cultural resources is accompanied by a widespread lack of devotion and reverence and we inherit the aesthetic character of folk dance culture with a lack of respect and responsibility, instead modifying it or even allowing it to wither away in a selfish manner, this will not be forgiven by history. If we tenaciously defend folk dance cultural traditions in a slavishly imitating way and cannot find a correct method to understand and develop the aesthetic character of folk dance culture, causing it to separate and even turn away from the present ecological environment, it's unavoidable that it will be left behind by reality. But in the rapid development of China's commercial society and under the swift and violent state of globalization, if we cannot hold the higher ground through cultural consciousness, it will be hard to avoid being blindly swept up in the tides.

It can be said that the many different layers of the national folk dance concept all flow from a common root and a common source. Because Chinese national folk dance gestated in and was born from the womb of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族), long-standing and well-established historical culture has injected a profound "cultural gene" into national folk dance. This gene that has been passed down for thousands of years holds together the formal characteristics and cultural connotations of Chinese national folk dance, forming the aesthetic character of Chinese national folk dance and becoming a "cultural symbol." Thus, the evolution and development of Chinese national folk dance is destined to be inseparable from a certain kind of "aesthetic character" bestowed by the genetic inheritance of the maternal body. This kind of aesthetic character formed the cultural distinctiveness of the national folk dances of China's different regions and different nationalities, constructing the aesthetic foundation for national tradition. Of course, the inheritance of aesthetic genes is also dynamic and shifting with the changes of the times and the ecological environment. It is only because of the support of the core genes that tradi-

tion has a kind of stability. It is precisely this kind of genetic inheritance that fundamentally controlled the hereditary selection of Chinese national folk dance traditional culture and also controlled the aesthetic tendencies of Chinese national folk dance, allowing us to possess a communal and shared aesthetic home.

Feng Shuangbai 冯双白 showed special attention to this “root” cultural gene. A summary of the 2005 national symposium of regular secondary school dance department and program chairs jointly sponsored by the China Dancers’ Association and the Beijing Normal University’s Art and Media Institute Dance Department under the theme “the inheritance of national dance culture and contemporary dance education” stated:

[Feng] pointed out an important problem in national dance education, that is, when folk dance goes from the true folk to the conservatory and school classrooms of the modern educational system, how should it correctly be inherited and modified? Through the example of Jia Zuoguang’s refinement of Mongol ritual dance into a Mongol dance that is greatly welcomed by the Mongol people, [Feng] argued persuasively that the inheritance of folk dance should accurately grasp the “root” thing of the relevant nationality culture, meaning being able to convey things of the national personality, bearing, and humanistic spirit. Even in the fierce changes of modern society, these things that represent and preserve national personality must not be lost. They together determine the style of national folk dance.<sup>26</sup>

Actually, national folk dance choreography also faces this problem. This kind of root cultural gene is the key to China’s contemporary cultural reconstruction. If it is lost, we lose the opportunity to initiate the culture of the new era. From this perspective, as a mode of community dance culture that shoulders tradition, Chinese national folk dance choreography is destined not to become a completely individualistic choreography. Dance professionals and cultural elites must take solemn responsibility for the inheritance of Chinese national folk dance aesthetics. This poses a grave question for staged national folk dance choreography. It needs not only to make creative choreography preserve and renew the special aesthetic character but also to bring the aesthetic inheritance of Chinese national folk dance into a new stage through aesthetic pursuits that overcome tradition.

China’s various nationalities possess extremely rich folk culture. From

the organization and writing of the *Compendium of Chinese National Folk Dance* (*Zhongguo minzu minjian wu jicheng* 中国民族民间舞集成), one can see that Chinese national folk dance is shocking in its scale and quantity. However, the many varied nationality styles and vibrant folk dances are also unified into the dance culture of the Chinese nation. Forming a close relationship with the elite dance culture, they become an extremely visible artistic form that represents Chinese traditional society and constitutes a distinctly Chinese national folk dance phenomenon. These histories and traditions have led Chinese national folk dance stage choreography to exhibit a flourishing image and to have quite a unique development in the global context. Our national folk dance choreography not only needs to present the culture and style of traditional dance but also has moved toward a more expansive and more professional arena; with the aid of national folk dance source materials, it carries out a stage art expression that extends beyond the category of folk culture. Moreover, in China this extension of stage art expression in contemporary national folk dance beyond folk culture is extremely large. The level of artistic innovation is also quite high, and it is very distant from a simple “lively image and exotic tone” or “representative national dance” that represents a nationality. Rather, what is so rare and precious is that the stage art choreography of Chinese national folk dance has become a very mainstream form of dance choreography in China. It not only inherits folk traditions from below but also exerts an important influence on folk dance from above. It is not completely the same as the Western concept of “folk dance” or “national dance” but instead is situated between the two. Within this cyclical influence it has become a self-perfecting and self-elevating cultural “living body” (*huoti* 活体) and even more has become a kind of dignified art form that can represent national spirit and national culture.

For this reason, this book’s analysis of the aesthetics of Chinese national folk dance choreography does not entail a dispersed and random set of readings of works but rather attends to the historical trajectory and practical conditions of its existence. The book focuses on creative problems closely related to the special qualities of national aesthetics. In other words, from within the developmental pathways of Chinese national folk dance choreography, it asks what attitudes and methods one should use to develop the special qualities of traditional aesthetics. In this book, the temporal notion of the “contemporary” begins with the 1942 Yan’an Forum on Literature and the Arts. For China’s literature and arts, this is an important begin-

ning of the contemporary era. Particularly for Chinese national folk dance, the New Yangge movement that followed the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts is a typical dance phenomenon. For decades afterward, Chinese national folk dance choreography reflected the deep impact of this beginning and became a very prominent cultural phenomenon. Small-scale works of dance choreography can more purely embody national folk dance itself and its special qualities. Therefore, this book focuses on representative small-scale national folk dance choreographies and does not place too much emphasis on large-scale dance dramas. It is necessary to also point out that works of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography are extremely numerous, and this book does not aim to provide a comprehensive and objective presentation according to historical methods. Rather, it selects works with representative significance and takes these as samples or case studies for typical analysis. In this way, it attends to these "points" in order to string together a thread of aesthetic flow and change.

On this foundation, we aim to explain the following: What are the historical factors that have led to confusion in national folk dance choreography? What is the actual ecological environment that national folk dance choreography faces at the present time? What kind of cultural consciousness should we possess to face the future? Chinese civilization is a dynamic living civilization that has stretched continuously for several thousand years, and national folk dance is an important component part within it. In the multicultural dialogic context brought on by globalization, reviewing and sorting through the historical process of post-1949 China's national folk dance choreography and analyzing its onstage aesthetic forms and cultural connotations will allow us to clarify concepts. From this, we will be able to provide an answer to the choices and pursuits of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography.





## CHAPTER 2

# *The Transformation of Contemporary Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography and Its Causes*

### 2.1. HISTORICAL CHANGES IN THE AESTHETIC FORM OF CHINESE NATIONAL FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY

Through an analysis of case studies of Chinese national folk dance choreography from different historical periods, we can sort out the historical transformations of its aesthetic form. Here, works have been selected based not on whether they won awards but rather on whether they had influence in their time and are typical representations of different aesthetic directions. Of course, because the interpretation of choreography is subjective, the selection of dance works in this book inevitably carries some subjective understanding and evaluation. This does not imply any slighting or dismissal toward choreographic works not discussed here.

#### 2.1.1. Early Years in a Passionate Age

Before we enter the fluctuating and multifarious aesthetic world of contemporary Chinese national folk dance, we must examine the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts, which had a profound influence on the form of contemporary mainstream dance choreography. On May 2–23, 1942, in Yan'an, Yang Jialing 杨家岭 held a literature and arts symposium attended by over one hundred literature and arts cadres, with the aim of carrying out targeted study of the literature and arts work of the time. Chairman Mao gave opening and concluding remarks, which became the famous “Talks at the Yan'an Forum of Literature and the Arts” (hereafter “Talks”). The “Talks” cited deviations that had emerged in the literature and arts movement of

the border areas,<sup>1</sup> and it pointed out that the central questions of who literature and arts are for and how to serve them had not yet been resolved. Addressing this point, Mao Zedong clearly stated that literature and the arts must first and foremost serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers, the broad masses. Therefore, literature and art workers must shift their point of view to the standpoint of the workers, peasants, and soldiers. At the same time, the “Talks” also expounded upon the relationship between popularization and refinement (*puji yu tigao* 普及与提高) and emphasized that it was only by going deeply into the masses and into the contemporary struggle to draw at the source of creativity and by remolding oneself and erecting a revolutionary view of life that one could create works that would be loved by the popular masses.

At this literature and arts forum, the central ideas in Mao Zedong’s “Talks” actually set the basic tone for subsequent development of China’s literature and arts. In his response to the question of “who literature and arts are for and how to serve them,” his response was extremely clear: the Communist Party gradually became strong by activating the broad working masses, the mass line is a magic weapon of the party, and in the realm of literature and arts it is necessary to return to this foundation. This answer strongly paralleled the relationship that developed between folk dance and elite dance in Chinese history. In history, the dances that naturally spread among the folk served as a source for elite dance. What Mao Zedong called for in going deeply into the masses and going deeply into contemporary struggle without a doubt sounded a resonant call to action. For the dance art of that time, this call to action was almost crystal clear and unmistakably pointed to folk dance. What was closer to the masses than folk dance? Was there a richer or more readily available resource than folk dance? This call to action was the direct cause for the first sudden growth of contemporary Chinese national folk dance. In a miraculous fashion, folk dance became an effective instrument for revolutionary arts and culture to arouse the people’s hearts. Wang Kefen 王克芬 and Long Yinpei 隆荫培 write,

This was an important meeting on literature and arts work. After the forum, the literature and arts world in Yan’an carried out a rectification, gained a correct understanding of the deviations that had occurred in Yan’an literature and arts work, and gradually made corrections through practice. Literature and arts workers began to go deeply into the countryside and the military, became familiar with life there, and threw them-

selves into the fiery struggle. This greatly transformed their thoughts and feelings. On the one hand, they worked hard to create and perform new works that reflected the life of fiery struggle. At the same time, they explored national forms of literature and art that the masses love to see and hear. From this came the historically unprecedented and vigorous *yangge*<sup>2</sup> movement, making an ancient folk dance form radiate with the breath of spring.<sup>3</sup>

“Fiery,” “love to see and hear,” “vigorous,” “breath of spring”—the *yangge* movement that these phrases point to became like a microcosm of life at that time in the revolutionary border areas. The time and place that served as the backdrop to the *yangge* movement were very clearly delineated. The place was mainly the vast countryside of the revolutionary border region during the strategic military arrangement of having the countryside surround the cities, when revolutionary kindling first ignited flames of passion in the great revolutionary border region. The time around 1942 was when the revolutionary border regions were getting started. After experiencing the extremely arduous Long March,<sup>4</sup> people finally had an opportunity to recuperate and rebuild even though at the same time they were also going through the most crucial part of the War against Japanese Aggression. Amid the various challenges, people were also feeling hope. Within this larger environment, literature and arts workers first naturally chose to go deeply into the countryside to explore national literary and art forms. When it comes specifically to the dance component of these literary and art forms, of course what was closest to them was the folk dances that spread throughout the countryside and carry strong elements of farming culture. Second, during the revolutionary war years, literature and art workers also naturally chose to go deep into the military to create new works that reflected the fiery life of struggle. Combining national literary and art forms with content from the fiery life of struggle gave a new look and spiritual connotation to the ancient folk dance forms, and it was precisely this look and spiritual connotation that made ancient folk dance forms irradiate with “the breath of spring.” For China’s national folk dance, this was a tremendously meaningful change. It signified that to a certain extent traditional national folk dances separated from the level of folk culture and became a new dance form in the hands of professional literature and art workers. As Wang and Long explain, “On September 23, 1942, Ding Li 丁里 published the essay ‘A Brief Discussion of *Yangge*’ in *Liberation Daily*. It argued that typically *yangge* was a kind of

entertainment performed during the winter agricultural slack season, but in the border regions, beyond being a form of entertainment, twisting *yangge* had also become a weapon for participating in political struggle and social activities with relatively large political impact.”<sup>5</sup>

From the *yangge* movement that sprang up in Yan’an there emerged a large body of new dance works built on the foundation of national folk dances. From these works it is clear that, compared with traditional national folk dance, they all underwent polishing and revision in terms of either form or content. In other words, to a greater or lesser degree they all had some component of “creation.” At the time, under the encouragement of the “Talks,” the Lu Xun Art Academy in Yan’an organized the first *yangge* troupe and began carrying out revisions on what were believed to be the folk songs and dances of the rustic poor. For example, the traditional folk song and dance *Phoenix Sun Flower Drum* (*Feng yang huagu* 凤阳花鼓) was adapted into *Support the Troupes Flower Drum* (*Yongjun huagu* 拥军花鼓). Just from the name alone, we can see that the folk flower drum was imbued with the content of “supporting the troupes”; it was no longer only an entertainment and social activity for the agricultural slack season but expressed the supportive feelings of the people of the border region toward the revolutionary army. In the flower drum, when they would sing, “In the first month comes the new spring, drive the pig and the goat out the door, where were the pig and the goat sent?” the response couldn’t more clearly convey the new content—“They were sent to our heroic Eighth Route Army.” The transformation of content in folk songs and dances also impacts the transformation of form. Content became the determining factor in New *Yangge*; content determined the need to remold the form, and it also determined that some traditions would be abandoned. Similarly, in *Support the Troupes Flower Drum*, if the old forms had been used without any change, this would inhibit the expression of the new content. Wang and Long write,

This exciting song and dance scene immediately attracted the attention and appreciation of the masses. However, in terms of the makeup, they maintained the painted white nose bridge and upward pointing ponytail image used for the male character in the old song and dance. The woman clown held a rolling pin in her hand and had red hot peppers hanging from her ears, and in the *yangge* troupe they still had men playing female roles, etc. After they arrived at Zaoyuan and performed for the central party leaders, the leaders pointed out that the form and content were



Fig. 1. *Support the Troupes Flower Drum*, 1942. Choreographers: Wang Dahua, Li Bo.

not aligned. The content had changed, but the form had still not fully changed.<sup>6</sup>

The comical image of the clown in traditional folk song and dance is an obvious mismatch with the glorified and lofty image of “support the troupes.” To fit the brand-new content, the form naturally needed to be adjusted. This approach to tradition is known as “absorbing the cream and expelling the dregs” (*qu qi jinghua, qu qi zaopo* 取其精华, 去其糟粕). Here, the cream that is absorbed and the dregs that are expelled of course are all in service of the new content. On the whole, the new content needs to suit an upright, positive, and forward-looking spiritual disposition. Therefore, the newly expressed content also determined the overall artistic style of the New Yangge of that period. The yangge drama *Brother and Sister Open the Wasteland* (*Xiongmei kaihuang* 兄妹开荒) is a canonical work of that era and is also a great pioneering production. It used the folk song and dance form to express life in the border regions and the production movement. The *Dictionary of Chinese Dance* states, “The music took northern Shaanxi folk music as its foundation and developed it according to the needs of expressing the new life of the masses. Within this, the dance portion then used yangge steps and added movements that imitated production. It was lively and cheerful.”<sup>7</sup> As the first yangge drama (*yangge ju* 秧歌剧) in the yangge movement, the aesthetic style that we see here is, on the one hand, the optimistic revolutionary spirit that filled life in the border region with a burgeoning vitality at a time of great difficulty during the arduous revolutionary struggle. Just as it was for the masses with the opening of the wasteland in Nanniwan Valley, their spirit was focused on the future and filled with hope even though they



Fig. 2. *Brother and Sister Open the Wasteland*, 1943. Yan'an Lu Xun Art Academy students Wang Dahua and Li Bo perform yangge drama on Yan'an public square.

clearly faced neglect and privation. On the other hand, in this temporal and spatial context, they neither had nor needed effete and sentimental writing, just the most direct and humble feelings and experiences. Therefore, performances like *Brother and Sister Open the Wasteland* were directly rooted in the folk soil and were extremely realistic and unadorned.

Wu Xiaobang 吴晓邦 once described his first encounter with reformed New Yangge dance at that time in an essay:

In the yangge team, the men had a white hero's knot stuck on their head and a red sash around their waist, presenting an extraordinary martial demeanor. Long silk sashes were tied around the women's waists, and they danced with handkerchiefs in both hands, stepping in time to the beat of the accompanying gong and drum in correspondence with the men's movements. The movements were exquisite and bold. The men's team leader held a steel hammer in his hand, and the women's team leader held a sickle. Together they represented the worker and the farmer. After the entire male and female yangge troupe entered the performance space, they would first run in a circle, and then the men and women

would separate into two dancing circles. Later, the men's and women's groups would rejoin, with the women forming a smaller circle inside and the men dancing in a larger circle outside them. After dancing for a while, the two troupes would again separate, and then a group dressed as Eighth Route Army soldiers would weave their way in. By this point, the *yangge* formation included workers, peasants, and soldiers, and the changes were even more frequent. In a split second, the *suona* horn would sound, and the space would be filled with celebratory voices as everyone began to sing the production songs of the border area. As they sang, they performed "Worker Peasant Soldier Great Production."<sup>8</sup>

According to Wu Xiaobang's impressions, the New Yangge of the border regions was both fresh and full of vitality. From his description, we can see that this freshness and vitality must have come from the New Yangge dancers' new revolutionary mental outlook and the clear political symbolism in New Yangge dance. Both imbued traditional *yangge* with completely different connotations and directly introduced changes to *yangge*'s form: the dance styles of the extraordinarily heroic male dancers and the exquisite and bold female dancers were magnanimous and positive, their props included the revolutionary symbols of the hammer and sickle, and the entering of the Eighth Route Army soldiers and the singing of border region production songs were all new elements. In particular, the enlargement of speed, scale, and force of movements in New Yangge did away with the "small farmer" feel of the traditional *yangge* and brought forth a completely new revolutionary ambiance. However, although the connotation and significance had changed, the utility that the New Yangge achieved at the time in the border area was very great. In a certain way, this extended the influence that folk song and dance had on promoting thoughts and beliefs among the masses, except that the original religious connotations were transformed into political faith. It could be said that New Yangge dance had already become a revolutionary ritual of the new era. In this ritual, the people released their revolutionary passion and entrusted their revolutionary convictions.

In fact, the *yangge* movement that arose after the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts already settled the basic direction and method for Chinese national folk dance development. In direction, the view "from the masses, to the masses" very typically manifested the expectations and guidance given by the newly emerging rule of the proletariat toward literature and the arts. This can be summarized in one of Chairman Mao's famous



statements: "Life is the only source of literature and arts creation." This saying became the guiding principle in China's literature and arts. In terms of method, the approach of "absorbing the cream and expelling the dregs" then typically manifested the method of inheritance that involves taking and leaving from traditional art forms according to the needs of the content. All of this was proven to be actually an effective path for literature and arts. The *yangge* movement in the border areas set in motion a literature and arts movement in which the masses became the subject. By promulgating revolution, it also made the *yangge* movement into a symbol of revolution during that passionate age. The power of this symbol even radiated from the border areas to the cities. In the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT)-controlled city of Chongqing, *yangge* folk dance had already magically emerged as the image of Yan'an, the revolutionary holy land. Wang and Long write,

When there was a performance of the collective *yangge*, Zhou Enlai and others first stood up from their chairs and joined the *yangge* troupe, dancing full of enthusiasm. Most of the performers who were sitting couldn't stand it any longer, so they also joined the *yangge* team one after another. As the team grew, the mood became more and more enthusiastic. Some residents living near the press office were also let in, and they sat around to watch the *yangge* performance. This was the first time that such a raucous *yangge* broke out in the KMT-controlled city of Chongqing. Some literature and arts workers were so moved that their eyes brimmed with tears, feeling as if they had arrived at the War against Japanese Aggression holy land of Yan'an.<sup>9</sup>

If we say that the New Yangge of the revolutionary border areas was more simple, then because of the transplanted environment the *yangge* movement that gradually made its way to the cities gained an artistic air of revolutionary romanticism. Although the urban residents in the KMT-controlled cities could not truly understand and experience the living conditions and predicament of the border area, in their beliefs the border area had nevertheless already become the revolutionary holy land, and they entrusted to it their devotion to the revolution and anticipation of a bright future. The New Yangge that spread to the KMT-controlled areas thus provided a spiritual bridge to the holy land to satisfy these desires.

New Yangge truly became an example for how to successfully reform and propagate folk traditional song and dance according to the needs of the

times. However, what is interesting is that decades later Wu Xiaobang, in the same essay, also recorded that when he saw New Yangge, he reflected on and regretted that he had not seen old yangge:

At the time, my impression of New Yangge was just that the gong and drum beats were very exciting and could move a person's heartstrings, but I felt that its simple and repetitive dance movements left one unsatisfied. . . . In sum, what I saw I took in at a glance, but it did not arouse much imagination in me. I felt it was fresh and lively but did not take a strong interest. Later, as I was reflecting, I thought that perhaps the comrades who had gone to study yangge dance did not understand it or did not study it deeply, or perhaps their hesitations were too great and they couldn't clearly differentiate the cream from the dregs. Perhaps they feared that if they became stained by some unhealthy things they might get into trouble, and as a result they were fearful and cautious and only studied a bit of its entering walks and shifting formations, but had not studied the flesh and blood of old yangge.<sup>10</sup>

Judging from this section of writing, although yangge gave Wu Xiaobang the impression of newness and vitality, it did not completely touch him at the deepest level. As an artist, what he really wanted to see and feel was "the flesh and blood of old yangge," a traditional whole form in which the form and content were blended together. Clearly, this "flesh and blood" should be the ancient traditional culture embedded in old yangge. It was precisely this "flesh and blood" that filled the outer "bodily shell" of yangge that made it a dynamic living thing. However, because of the need to express political content, part of the "flesh and blood" was consciously deleted, and this led the divided body to lose its traditional life. Simple, repetitive, lacking in imagination—this was the "side effect" created by New Yangge's pursuit of direct and simple expression. A certain level of disconnect between new expressive content and traditional culture made New Yangge dance weaken the feeling of mystery and depth in the ancient tradition, replacing it with the high-spirited revolutionary passion and spirit of the times.

Of course, Wu Xiaobang reflected on New Yangge dance several decades after the events actually occurred. However, there is a folk dance phenomenon from the same time period as the yangge movement that is very worthy of attention and that can to a certain extent verify the nuanced differences between political aims and artistic pursuits. This is Dai Ailian's 戴爱莲

excavation and organization of national folk dance and the frontier dance activities she led during the 1940s in Chongqing, Shanghai, and other cities. As a dance artist who returned from the West, Dai Ailian, trained in ballet and modern dance, nevertheless became deeply absorbed in the national folk dance art of her ancestral country. In 1941, after she watched a Yao nationality mass drum dance custom in Guangxi, she created her first ethnic minority dance, *Yao Drum* (*Yaoren zhi gu* 瑶人之鼓). The *Dictionary of Chinese Dance* offers the following description of it: "Dressed in dark blue fabric, with an even lapel, long enough to cover her knees and body, with a rim of colored embroidery, her hair in a coiled bun, adorned with a crown of silver fabric; large hoops hung from her ears, silver bracelets on her wrists, her waist tied with a long wrap, and her torso adorned with clasps, necklace, and tiles made of silver. Flowered fabric wrapped around her legs, and on her feet flower embroidered shoes with red pompoms. With drumsticks in her hands she dances about." This is clearly a down-to-earth work that absorbs the folk dance tradition. Not only do the costume's character and the movements of turning the body in circles while beating a drum both come directly from the folk, but the aesthetic connotation that it conveys also points directly to the origin of folk traditional culture, extending the solemn and esoteric atmosphere of ceremonial dances made for sacrifices to the gods. Dai Ailian also studied with the famous Gui opera performer Little Flying Swallow and adapted *The Mute Carries the Cripple* (*Yazi bei feng* 哑子背疯) from Gui opera into a dance work. What is most interesting about the dance *The Mute Carries the Cripple* is its use of a traditional Chinese opera prop, an amusing form in which one person performs two roles. The dictionary goes on: "While dancing, the upper body performs feminine movements, with a colored scarf in the left hand and a fan in the right hand. The lower body performs masculine movements, just as if two people are performing." Not only was the style she expressed faithful to tradition, but also "through the scenes of walking, traversing the bridge, and catching butterflies, it portrayed the optimistic and sanguine mood of two disabled people."<sup>11</sup> From this, we can see the artist's sensitive ability to master traditional culture, and this is why at the time, the newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* (*Da gong bao* 大公报) assessed, "This kind of rich technique and imagination can only be created by a true people's artist." In 1946, after Dai Ailian immersed herself deeply in the collection of more folk dances, with the support of the Chongqing Yucai School and various other circles, she held the first "Frontier Music and Dance Plenary" with unprecedented success. Following this, her frontier



Fig. 3. *Yao Drum*, 1941.  
Choreographer: Dai Ailian. (Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database [1911–49], *Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin* [CNBKSY], Shanghai Library.)

dance quickly spread through cities in the KMT-occupied areas. This also gave her the honor of being seen as the harbinger of organizing and refining Chinese national folk dance.

The frontier dance fad was a magnificent feat carried out by specific people in a specific time and place. After China experienced the long period of wartime chaos, people in urban areas nearly forgot traditional dance culture, but Dai Ailian opened this tightly sealed treasure chest anew. Although today we can only see some short excerpts recorded on yellowed old film, you can still feel the passion embodied in Dai Ailian's dances. This passion is more so a love for traditional dance culture itself, and because of Dai's identity as a returned overseas Chinese artist, this expands our understanding of her love and passion. Dai Ailian's attitude and passion toward traditional



Fig. 4. *The Mute Carries the Cripple*, 1946. Adapted by Dai Ailian and Peng Song. (Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-Text Database [1911–49], Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin [CNBKSY], Shanghai Library.)

culture were more a kind of artistic consciousness: admiring and cherishing traditional culture and using the body to powerfully enact its imitation and performance. This was in fact a continuation of the standard practice of “collecting ballads/folk styles” (*caifeng* 采风) in ancient times, in which national folk dance culture appeared outside folk contexts through the more elegant forms made by artists. Unlike the stronger political implications of New Yangge, Dai Ailian’s frontier dance was clearly more grounded in the actual excavation and organization of national folk dance traditions, and as a result it had a special cultural influence. Because of Dai’s identification with her ancestral country and her ethnic identity, frontier dance possessed a progressive significance and blew a fresh breeze into the big cities of the KMT-occupied areas. At the time, the “frontier dance” that Dai Ailian performed in the Shanghai Yiyuan Theater swept like a hurricane through this showy city, where the youth especially were extremely taken with it. Many newspapers in Shanghai introduced and reviewed her epoch-making performances. As described by Wang and Long,

At the time, studying progressive “frontier dance” became a trend among Shanghai’s university and secondary school students and employed youth. For example, at schools and during the leisure time of young staff in various professions, they were performing the lively dance steps, twirling their wrists, as they danced *Dance Song of Youth* (*Qingchun wuqu* 青春舞曲) singing the lyrics “The sun sets but tomorrow will rise up again, the flower wilts but will open again next year, the beautiful little bird flies away without a trace, the little bird of my youth also will not return.”<sup>12</sup>

What a lovely dance scene! Dai Ailian took every opportunity to study and present national folk dance. Although she only learned *Dance Song of Youth* secondhand from a friend, and even though it was not a true traditional style, nevertheless, the attractiveness of that lively and cheerful demeanor of the western parts of China still had a very strong “infectiousness.” From it, we cannot see the grief and chaos of war but instead feel the unrestrained plenitude of life. Frontier dance gave wings to the hearts of youth living in the big cities, allowing them to take flight from the disorderly and foul city air and enter a refreshing and free pastoral world. Regardless of whether the pasture was really as beautiful as the fantasy, frontier dance nonetheless gave people a chance to freely imagine happiness and enjoy the dreams of youth, as well as to pursue hopes for something better. Although frontier dance and New Yangge were both progressive dance, the former possessed a greater closeness to tradition and a more romantic artistic disposition.

In fact, both the New Yangge movement and the frontier dance elicit our admiration for their broad circulation in that era. Especially for what national folk dance expressed in that specific time and place, its adaptation to and circulation in the big cities are undoubtedly the double-layered use and influence of the historical environment and the dance form. This is really worthy of reflection on the predicament facing the promotion of national folk dance in big cities today: what kind of spiritual meaning should folk dance ultimately provide to people in today’s metropolis? This is a question that we will explore further below. Yet, regardless of whether it was the political significance of the New Yangge movement or the artistic and cultural taste of frontier dance, what garnered people’s appreciation was that kind of unusually pure faith and firm passion. National folk dance was fortunate in that it was chosen by the people and became a carrier for this kind of faith and passion, writing it firmly into history. This was an important beginning. Contemporary Chinese national folk dance started to climb



Fig. 5. *Dance Song of Youth*, 1942. Adapted by Ye Luqian and Dai Ailian. (Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-Text Database [1911–49], *Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin* [CNBKSY], Shanghai Library.)

from the folk to a higher level of the “performance stage.” From two different perspectives, political and artistic, it established a basic direction of development for its remolding and creation.

Fundamentally speaking, the reform of national folk dance was a historical inevitability. This is because, compared to the earthshattering developments in contemporary life that were brought about by China’s revolution, the revolution in artistic discourse could not be achieved overnight. Art forms like traditional national folk dance are the cultural accumulation of over a thousand years of history and constitute a nation’s collective memory. Thus, updating them, of course, cannot be a swift replacement like in a revolution that overturns a regime. Therefore, when the actual revolution needs artistic expression, the problem of not having corresponding artistic forms will lead people to choose to continue using traditional art forms and to transform them. Simply put, China’s contemporary national folk dance lost

its opportunity to develop and to be passed on naturally. It leaped over a giant time and space of social development and became the target of development and reform, entering a completely new arena.

### 2.1.2. The Canonical 1950s and “the Debate over Peacock Dance Form”

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the development of dance art was placed on the agenda. First, we should recognize that the development of new Chinese national folk dance is in fact a continuation and elevation of the New Yangge movement and frontier dance. Xia Yu, writing in China’s *Dance* magazine in 1958, stated, “After the entire country was liberated, the new dance art vocation came under the correct leadership and support of the Chinese Communist Party, inheriting the glorious traditions of the *yangge* dance movement and the frontier dance movement. On the foundation of folk dance, it quickly developed and grew. In a few short years, it already made notable achievements.”<sup>13</sup> The success of *yangge* dance and frontier dance opened up the path for arts and culture workers to unite with the masses of the people, and it also made national folk dance become an important cornerstone for China’s new dance art from day one.

Since the foundation of the PRC, in dance development, national folk dance occupied almost half of the country. The first and second All-China Folk Music and Dance Festivals hosted after the founding of the PRC brought together hundreds upon hundreds of amateur performers and presented hundreds of works created by reorganizing folk materials. This gave professional art workers an extremely precious opportunity for study. Through this kind of activity, the government consciously guided the developmental course of national folk dance art. Learning from the folk and learning from the people became the source for dance creation. From 1949 to 1962, the World Festival of Youth and Students for Friendship and Peace became an important international stage for Chinese dance. Of the fifty-five dance works that won some kind of award, thirty-two of them were national folk dance, making up a large majority. As previously stated, Chinese national folk dance initially did not form a fully independent dance system within teaching. However, this did not inhibit the rapid development of Chinese national folk dance choreography. Especially in the 1950s, inheriting and developing national folk dance became the guiding principle





Fig. 6. *Red Silk Dance*, 1951. Performed by Central Song and Dance Ensemble. Image from the 1970s.

of dance workers, and a large number of works appeared that were adapted from existing folk dance foundations. These exquisite works made it difficult to ever replicate the canonicity of Chinese national folk dance choreography of the 1950s.

The 1951 *Red Silk Dance* (*Hongchou wu* 红绸舞) is a representative work of the early years of the PRC. This dance developed and refined the silk dance movements in *yangge* folk dances of the Han nationality and the long silk dances of traditional Chinese opera. Tian Jing writes,

At the beginning of the dance, a group of young men and women raise up red torches to celebrate the holiday. The torches suddenly unfurl from youths' hands and leap amid the torches sending out countless lines of bright red long silk high above the dancers' heads, like fireworks flying and dancing through the air. . . . They alternate back and forth between all kinds of high difficulty silk dance techniques, forming one beautiful tableau after another. At the end, the young men and women form a circle toward the middle of the stage and dance large wheels of silk on their left and right, forming a shape like a shooting fireball. Like a blazing flame soaring and kindled, it brings the red-hot emotion of the dance to a climax.<sup>14</sup>

In *Red Silk Dance*, what we encounter is most certainly an image of fiery enthusiasm: the color red, torches, fireworks, soaring, and spurting all unquestionably suited the overjoyed mood and red-hot yearning of the people after the founding of the PRC. The dance employed the tradition of props in Chinese national folk dance to adeptly position red silk as the choreography's central element and symbol. The human body movements in the dance are quite simple. The upper limbs mainly maneuver the red silk props, while the bottom limbs primarily consist of rhythmic leaping steps. Compared to these really uncomplicated dance movements, the dancing red silks themselves have a more prominent sense of form and greater importance of meaning. When the red silk symbolizing a torch instantly spouts open, whether visually or psychologically, it creates a strong force of impact. A stage filled with dancing red silks stretching out from the dancers' hands fantastically becomes an extension of the people's mood and will, and we become enveloped in the dazzling scene and red-hot mood, even to the point that we forget to observe the human body. In coordination with the management and composition of the stage formations, the red silk fills the air with red passion. In my view, *Red Silk Dance* is a typical extension of New Yangge, and it is also a typical transcendence of New Yangge. The progressive meaning embedded in this work is very clear; it successfully remolded traditional national folk dance and became filled with a strong content of the times. This is clearly the path and spirit of the New Yangge movement. However, compared with the New Yangge of the early period, the artistry of *Red Silk Dance* is obviously much higher. The choreography uses red silk to construct a fiery red image, and it succinctly expresses the feelings of Chinese people in the early 1950s. In terms of artistic method, its refinement of traditional national folk dance and innovative choreography is more skillful. In artistic presentation, it possessed a certain level of artistic abstraction, no longer that kind of almost frank and schematic expressive method of early New Yangge. *Red Silk Dance* was a portent of things to come. While expanding and persisting on the path of New Yangge, it also strengthened in creative artistry.

Jia Zuoguang 贾作光 and his dances are a very typical example of 1950s national folk dance choreography. Jia Zuoguang studied dance as a child, receiving personal instruction by the Japanese modern dancer Ishii Baku, including strict ballet and modern dance training. Innate talent and an exceptional work ethic led him to quickly display remarkable ability. However, Jia's dance career underwent a major shift when, in the late 1940s,

under the direction of Wu Xiaobang, he arrived in the newly liberated area of Inner Mongolia. As if “digging for gold,” Jia devoted all his attention to excavating and collecting dances he found across the grasslands and rooted in the people. He created many works reflecting grassland life and the Mongol nationality. There are some similarities here with Dai Ailian’s experience: they both have a training background in Western ballet and modern dance, both became absorbed in national dance art, and both made great contributions to the organization and refinement of national folk dance art. However, regarding the level of immersion in national folk dance, Jia Zuoguang advanced a step beyond Dai Ailian because he lived for a prolonged period on the grassland. He wore Mongolian long robes, rode fast steeds, domesticated horses, milked animals, practiced horsemanship and archery, wrestled, drank alcohol, and sang songs—and, of course, danced together with herders. This period of deeply engaging in grassland life gave Jia Zuoguang a foundation for sublimating national folk dances, and it was precisely this period of life that made his creation and development of national folk dance unique and stand out. He himself once said about his experience of herders’ dance: “So magnificent, so rich, I was practically dumbstruck, and I wanted to use dance to be in dialogue with them.” The most interesting part of this statement is the word “dialogue.” It shows that Jia Zuoguang was not imitating or reproducing the herders’ dances but rather using his own dance to “dialogue” with them. Two factors determined the content of this dialogue. First, the motivation was an excitement prompted by the herders’ dancing, and, second, Jia Zuoguang’s prior dance training became the foundation for carrying out this dialogue. The former made this dialogue feel the deep impact of the herders’ national folk dances, and it brought Jia and the herders closer together in aesthetic and feeling. The latter made this dialogue possess a potentiality that transcended the kind of national folk dance itself.

As early as 1947, Jia Zuoguang’s *Pasture Horse* (*Muma wu* 牧马舞) already successfully portrayed the image of a herdsman with a bold and generous personality and master horsemanship, and it became a frequently performed representative work of the 1950s and 1960s. In the words of Tian Jing 田静, *Pasture Horse* portrays “a young herder who drives herds of horses, steps on dewy grasses, welcomes the dawn, and arrives at a verdant pasture rich in water and grass. The horses casually eat the young grass as the herder sings along with the spring breezes, nourished in nature’s abundance. Suddenly, a fierce colt starts running. The herder grabs a horse pole, jumps onto its back, and bravely steers it to return to the horse herd.” In



Fig. 7. *Pasture Horse*, 1947. Performed by Jia Zuoguang.

*Pasture Horse*, Jia Zuoguang's "movements are handsome and unrestrained, and his dance steps were strong and vigorous, especially the flipping, leaping, and turning techniques that showed the taming and lassoing of the horse, which adeptly, agilely, and outstandingly portrayed the image of an Inner Mongolian herder."<sup>15</sup> From this, we can see that *Pasture Horse* clearly is not a naturally circulating herder folk dance but rather is using dance to portray the image of a typical character. The structure consists of a simple scene, and the movement comprises a moving image refined from laboring life. In particular, by integrating dance technique with the work movements of taming and lassoing a horse, Jia Zuoguang developed a new dance vocabulary. He used his own dance method to praise the industriousness and bravery of the herders, and he also used his dance method to "dialogue" with the herders. This is, of course, a deeper level of dance art creation, and it is already not merely a simple organization of folk dances.

It's important to note that the 1954 *Ordos Dance* (*E'erdusi wu* 鄂尔多斯舞) is a more typical case. This work won a first prize at the fifth World



Fig. 8. *Ordos Dance*, 1954. Performed by Jia Zuoguang, Siqintariha, and others. (Image obtained from the Beijing Dance Academy Library.)

Festival of Youth and Students and swept the nation in the 1950s. This is a group dance with five men and five women that possesses a very strong herder character. In the entire dance, what gives people the strongest impression is the movement form of the two hands grasping the waist while moving the shoulders and with both wrists pressing up and down. The powerful movement areas of the shoulders and hands became typical formal characteristics that expressed the special quality of Mongol nationality folk dance, while also conveying a kind of lively and forceful, enthusiastic and positive, spiritual atmosphere. However, this kind of dance that initially appears to be an Ordos folk dance is in fact not naturally circulating but rather created by Jia Zuoguang. Tian Jing writes,

The local folk realm originally does not have this kind of dance. Jia Zuoguang developed and innovated it according to dance movements performed by lamas during spirit dancing (*tiaogui* 跳鬼) in temples, such as “spreading gold,” “deer dance,” etc. At the same time, he also took movements from herders’ daily lives, such as riding horses, flourishing the whip, milking animals, and braiding hair, and he added rhythm and pacing and also added throughout the piece movements such as “large and

small pulling up of the wrists,” “soft and hard moving of the shoulders” that are common to grassland dance. Additionally, he created special techniques such as “swinging hands back bend,” “single leg plank back” to strengthen the work’s technical quality and artistic appeal. In the forty years since *Ordos Dance* was first created and performed, it has already been embraced by the local people as the national folk dance of their region.<sup>16</sup>

From this description, we can more clearly see that Jia Zuoguang’s national folk dance is filled with innovation. He can take authentic folk dance and movements from labor and life along with grassland dance style and truly blend them together to create a completely novel dance vocabulary. What’s more important is that the new vocabulary is filled with the breath of daily life, and it also possesses vivid national color. Therefore, it is very well received and loved by the people, even to the point that many believe it is their own dance “handed down from the ancestors.” Jia Zuoguang’s demonstrated expert skill at integration and his unique artistic experience are tightly related. In my view, he possesses the dual identities of both stage artist and folk performer. Because he trained early on in ballet and modern dance and had experience in composition, he had a higher artistic cultivation than folk artists, and because he spent a long time immersed in the folk life of grassland herders, he gained a deeper cultural understanding of folk dance than many other artists. Therefore, his dance choreography is truly born of the womb of folk dance, a new life linked to its mother’s flesh and blood, which at the same time possesses both the inheritance of folk culture and the innovation of stage art. And, it is precisely because of this that Jia’s dance became a classic on the stage, which reflects him as an artist and his choreography as a work of art. That his dance returns to circulate among the folk reflects him as a folk performer and the dance as inheritance. That Jia Zuoguang can attain an expert level in both areas, while also finding such a harmonious balance between the two, makes him and his dances a rare phenomenon in the development of Chinese national folk dance. Especially the fact that his dances can circulate back to the folk and receive such recognition—this means that through his hard work at “later learning,” he almost achieved an “inborn” quality. Additionally, from the aesthetic character of the times, the vastness of the grasslands and the boldness of the nomadic nationalities gave Mongol dance a magnanimous, optimistic, and lively quality. To a certain degree, this matched the positive and open atmo-

sphere of the early years of the PRC. In this way, Jia Zuoguang and his Mongol nationality dance quickly approached the aesthetic sentiments of the era and of the nation and became a model for the development and creation of national folk dance. Jia Zuoguang also became a standard illustration of the relationship between art and the people and between art and life.

No matter what, from this standard illustration we can make out an important point; that is, national folk dance choreography during the 1950s already rose to a completely new level. The artist's choreographic foundation was no longer limited to the national folk dance that had been studied itself but expanded to materials from the entire environment in which national folk dance exists—from labor, from life, from the traditional, and from the modern. Choreographers no longer only carried out revisions to national folk dance itself but went deeply into the wider realm of folk life. They used an artist's vision to refine elements from within life that can be turned into dance and integrated them with traditional national folk dance. Clearly, this already overcame the basic scope of folk dance circulation and really entered the field of choreography. Artists demonstrated the ability to create new national folk dance vocabularies. I believe that among the classic works of 1950s national folk dance choreography, those with truly broad popularity and lasting appeal are all of this variety. *Joyful Nuosu* (*Kuaile de luosuo* 快乐的罗嗦), *Straw Hat Dance* (*Caoli wu* 草笠舞), and *Harvest Song* (*Fengshou ge* 丰收歌) are folk dances of different nationalities that are also very representative works.

Those rapid arm-swinging and foot-stamping dance movements of the 1959 choreography *Joyful Nuosu* still remain vivid and lively in our memory to this day. Yet, this unique movement was also an invention of the choreographer Leng Maohong 冷茂弘. Tian Jing writes,

Because the Yi nationality people suffered in the past, most Yi nationality dances have a downcast emotional tone, and there are very few dances that express a happy mood. Leng Maorong used the Yi nationality ritual dance “Wazihei” as a foundation and absorbed movements such as the “large character step,” “turning leg,” “swinging skirt,” and “front placed leg” from other Yi nationality dances, then developed and changed them in terms of rhythm, movement pattern, force, speed, and scale. At the same time, Leng also used the special characteristics of swinging hands and footwork in mass improvisational dances and created the basic movements of *Joyful Nuosu* in which the upper body swings the arms without stopping and the lower body footwork continuously makes circles.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 9. *Joyful Nuosu*, 1959. Performed by Sichuan Province Mt. Liang Yi Autonomous State Cultural Work Troupe.

This creative central theme was the very crux supporting *Joyful Nuosu's* success. That rapid swaying of the wrists and continuous circling of the ankles formed a kind of happy leaping dance image, creating a strong contrast with traditional Yi nationality folk dances. Thus, the feeling of the Yi people's lives undergoing earthshaking change was accurately externalized by this entirely new dance form. To use the choreographer's own words, "Through a dance image filled with ethnic distinguishing qualities and typical character and mood, it used happy hands, happy feet, and a happy mood to perform a happy present day. The Yi people smashed their chains of slavery and traversed a thousand years in one step. It expressed this spirit of leaping centuries."<sup>18</sup> This kind of dance image was developed from traditional national folk dance and therefore possessed ethnic distinguishing qualities in terms of its form. However, the inner personality and mood that became typical already bore completely the mark of the times.





Fig. 10. *Straw Hat Dance*, 1960. Performed by Hainan Song and Dance Ensemble.

The 1960 *Straw Hat Dance* creatively developed Li nationality folk dance in a similar way. Compared to other works, the distinguishing qualities of Li nationality folk dance itself are not so apparent and clear. As a result, the choreographer Chen Qiao 陈翘 needed to spend more time going into life to search for inspiration for dance images. Both the grass hat prop itself and the overall style and mood of the dance were actually things Chen Qiao found directly from life. As Chen explains,

While playing in the river, one uses the grass hat to block the spraying water from others; guarding the beloved grass hat in hand, one turns the body to bypass the precipitous cliffs; putting on the grass hat, one carefully arranges the lovely colored fringe. . . . As the girls ascend the mountain, because their skirts are tight, they form an elegant posture with small steps and a slightly swaying upper body. They like to stand side by side, shifting their weight with a relaxed upper body to form a unique naturally bent line with hips out. Later, these all became a foundation drawn from life to refine the movement themes in *Straw Hat Dance*.<sup>19</sup>

It is evident that nearly all of the creative elements used in *Straw Hat Dance* come from Li people's lives. The movements refined from life, such as the



Fig. 11. *Harvest Song*, 1964. Nanjing Military District Front Line Song and Dance Ensemble.

hand grabbing the waist, the slightly protruding hip, the same-side coordination of steps and arm swings, and the combing of each other's hat fringe and woven belts all reflect the choreographer's meticulous observation of life. Because the dance comes directly from this observation, the resulting choreography blends together dance images with Li people's lives, possessing a strong ethnic and folk character. Although there isn't more traditional Li folk dance to serve as support, this kind of creation based on life is already feasible.

The 1964 dance *Harvest Song* similarly combined scenes of labor with dances refined from working life. The most striking aspect of this piece is the choreography of the harvesting process. The working women swing their scythes in unison, and the repetitive slashing action sets the atmosphere of a hot day while possessing the visual beauty of neatness and strength. The action of wielding a scythe for harvesting is brilliantly integrated with folk dance footwork from the region south of the Yangtze River, giving it a local character. The traditional beautiful women of this area take on a valiant and heroic appearance in the new era. At the end, their belts create a virtual scene of golden waves of wheat, and the dance culminates in an exciting atmosphere and eye-catching visuals.



Fig. 12. *Peacock Dance*, 1956. Performed by Central Song and Dance Ensemble.

This series of national folk dance choreographies emanates a moving atmosphere of life and an impressive level of artistic innovation. However, innovation in national folk dance choreography of the 1950s was not as entirely uncontroversial as it may appear through today's eyes. Jin Ming's 金明 1956 creation *Peacock Dance* (*Kongque wu* 孔雀舞) has now become a historical classic, yet the controversy it caused was like ripples in water: even when reaching stillness they cannot entirely disappear from sight.

*Peacock Dance* was adapted from Dai folk peacock dance. Zi Huayun's volume *Chinese Dance* states, "High on a hill, a 'peacock' with open tail shakes its beautiful wings and rushes down the mountain; a pair of 'wings' morphs into a 'peacock girl,' stepping to the beats of the elephant-foot drum and gong and the beautiful melody, and a flock of 'the king of birds' bursts into dance—drinking water, soaking in the sun, bathing, flying."<sup>20</sup> This work is filled with the natural beauty of women imitating an attractive peacock. However, authentic folk peacock dance is performed by men and uses masks

and props for the peacock's tail and wings. Yet *Peacock Dance* made a major change, not only removing the masks that cover facial expressions and the props that limit movements but also shifting to women performers. To accord with these changes, apart from maintaining some of the original folk peacock dance movements, the choreographer also absorbed and integrated other Dai folk dances, even classical dance elements, and combined these with the movements of peacocks in life, creating a stage choreography that is widely different from folk peacock dance. Regarding this bold innovation, performances of *Peacock Dance* were surrounded at the time by fierce debate, which resulted in three basic views, as outlined in a 1958 essay in *Dance* magazine. The first view was basically approving, believing that "*Peacock Dance* has a tight structure, varied composition, and created a gorgeous peacock image, giving people a sense of poetic beauty and making relatively successful use of ballet technique, uplifting Dai folk dance. It reflects happiness and peace." The second view takes a basically unapproving stance, believing *Peacock Dance* is a formalist work that "only pays attention to a gorgeous and grand outer form. In the process of reworking, it disrespects the costumes of minority nationalities, adding turns and lifting the skirts to reveal the legs. . . . Also, now the peahen opens its tail, failing to distinguish male from female, and as a result this work distorts real life." On this foundation, the critical faction concluded that *Peacock Dance* represented "hunting for folk dances at a distance" and "a bourgeois creative path." The third view was somewhat in the middle, on the one hand admitting that *Peacock Dance* succeeded in creating formal beauty, saying "the creator is imaginative and boldly overcame the original solo dance (and later duet) structure, creating a beautiful image representing happiness and peace." On the other hand, the third view criticized the work for "having a formalist tendency, with more work put into form than content. It shows insufficient understanding and respect for Dai life and customs."<sup>21</sup>

These are three typical left, center, and right views. Regardless of whether they liked the piece, the views cluster around two core ideas: first, the major changes in form and, second, the departure in content from the folk traditional customs. What is interesting is that all three views offer some form of appreciation or acceptance of the formal changes. The first and third views both felt that the formal reworking was successful and that the innovations in structure, composition, and movement technique were "imaginative" and created a "beautiful image." Even the largely critical second view cannot but acknowledge *Peacock Dance*'s "gorgeous and grand outer form" and concede

that “the form is beautiful.” The critical views mainly focus on the departures in content, asserting that the beauty in form cannot “make up over” a creative attitude that shows disrespect toward Dai traditional customs. Among the peacocks that serve as a religious totem of the Dai people, only the male opens its brilliant tail, so the peacock dancer according to traditional customs is also male. Changing it to female dancers clearly subverts the religious tradition. Wearing the relatively conservative Dai tube skirt in a way that reveals the upper leg is also unacceptable in traditional aesthetics. The label “a bourgeois creative path” immediately follows from this.

Nevertheless, among these different criticisms, one notices a kind of critical slippage—the maligned formalism is actually appreciated as *Peacock Dance*’s strength. In other words, *Peacock Dance* is good because of its form and is also not good because of its form. This is a typically Chinese method of criticism, always seeing both sides of something, even when often the two sides cannot be resolved. It’s a bit like praising the purity of white while at the same time pointing out that white lacks the profundity of black. According to this kind of view, there is no more white or black and one can only get gray; likewise, if *Peacock Dance* entirely followed custom, it would not have the formal feminine beauty. It is interesting and subtle to explore the mindset behind these views. If the first opinion is openhearted and filled with appreciation, then the second opinion is just looking cross in the shackles of ideology, and the third is insincerely playing both sides to chime in and criticize, a bit like sidestepping the issue, but ultimately is more positive. Therefore, I always have a vague sense that deep down, people really liked *Peacock Dance*. People emphasized the symbolism of happiness and peace in the pure and clean peacock, which gets close to Dai traditional culture while downplaying the problem of the male and female peacock in the religious totem. Some also questioned the rigid adherence to traditional boundaries and even tradition itself. Jiang Yaxiong wrote,

For example, the circle is the basic traditional form of folk dance, and dance for the entertainment of gods and goddesses is the traditional form of ritual dance, the former linked to people’s lives and the latter linked to people’s beliefs. When the people’s lives are fundamentally changed (as with Liberation<sup>22</sup>), these lives and beliefs no longer exist, so where will tradition take root? So we must first ask what kind of tradition it is.<sup>23</sup>

This commentary does not even distinguish whether a departure from tradition has occurred but simply asserts that the grounds for tradition in

real life have changed and thus the existence of tradition itself is no longer reasonable. Of course, I cannot completely agree that because life has progressed tradition should be entirely shaken, because within the purview of culture and art, tradition always has value. However, this commentary reveals the impact of China's social transformation on the preservation of tradition, which has only intensified. Compared to debates of that time, supporters of the second view would find today's China with its mini-skirts and gender nondifferentiation both hard to imagine and impossible to accept.

It must be acknowledged that *Peacock Dance* went even further in its reworking of national folk dance. The changes to gender, costume, and props greatly liberated the body, making the stage form of the peacock dance totally different from folk peacock dance. Interestingly, although this change departed from traditional religious custom, it appealed perfectly to contemporary aesthetic tastes. In everyday life, don't we often take it for granted that the beautiful peacock spreading its tail is a female? *Peacock Dance* used the image of an elegant female dance to fulfill this subjective aesthetic idea that does not correspond to natural truth. The appearance of *Peacock Dance* is representative of a new tendency during the 1950s toward pursuing beauty of artistic form in the development of national folk dance choreography. But compared with the departure from traditional cultural customs, actually where the innovation of *Peacock Dance* was greatest is in its insertion of elements external to the system of national folk dance—ballet technique and Chinese classical dance technique deeply influenced by ballet. These elements had no direct connection to folk culture or folk life and were an external dance culture and aesthetic blended with national folk dance. In a lot of the earlier national folk dance choreography, the influence of Western dance existed mainly just in a kind of hidden training or educational background, but *Peacock Dance's* direct use of elements at the level of movement technique meant that this influence was more apparent at the level of form. This meant that the development and creation of Chinese national folk dance stepped out from the arena of national folk dance traditional culture and life and took a step forward in scale. I think this step was very significant. A double-edged sword was placed in the hands of national folk dance, which if danced well would uplift stage art and if danced poorly would injure itself. This is because achieving a true blending of different cultural elements and having them be accepted are quite difficult. So it is no wonder that some people were cautious in their assessment of this approach. As Zhang Shiling 张世龄 wrote, "Do I think it's okay to rework folk dance like Comrade Jin?"

Yes. But this is not the future direction for reworking and developing folk dance, and it should not necessarily be strongly advocated.”<sup>24</sup>

We can see that the debate instigated by *Peacock Dance* already far exceeded the scope of the work itself and even involved the issue of the future direction of reworking and developing folk dance. In the context of China’s “Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom, Let One Hundred Schools Contend” policy, in fact there was always a latent question of dominant direction, similar to today’s “main melody.” As a flood of new national folk dance works appeared in the 1950s, and the artistic quality and variety of national folk dance became strengthened, of course it was necessary to raise the issue of “direction.” However, the artist’s creation always precedes the discussion of “direction,” and “direction” is continuously adjusted in ongoing discussion. The high level of artistic innovation in *Peacock Dance* has today already sedimented into a classic, and there is already no problem of “direction,” yet the “peacock dance mode of debate” is replicated continuously throughout the development of Chinese national folk dance. Although ripples in water may calm over time, as long as there is water, ripples emerge.

All national folk dance choreography, including those mentioned in this book and those not, together construct a splendid landscape of 1950s national folk dance and a canonicity that cannot be extinguished. As a whole, the canonicity of national folk dances of the 1950s lies in the profound “richness” that reappeared after a temporary hiatus, as well as in the collective and conscious “sublimation” led by the cultural and artistic policy established in Yan’an.

After a long period of wartime chaos, New China was built upon a land awaiting renewal. As a people’s art, folk dance art began to rise to the top. Dances once lost and dusty among the folk glowed like treasures that had regained their value, and the monochromatic world suddenly became colorful and exciting. Actually, China’s historical national folk dance tradition had always been rich and always interacted with court dances, and there had always been periods of growth and decline. The establishment of New China created a peaceful and passionate social environment, allowing these traditions to once again see the light of day. Yet compared to the vigorous growth of folk dance in history, because of the transformation of social ideology, the meaning of national folk dance in the 1950s was very different. As Xia Yu 夏雨 wrote in 1958, “In old society, people’s art was rejected and destroyed, so the fact that they were able to escape belittlement and prohibition and even step onto international stages is a major change with great political meaning.

It is also a symbol of the working people's leadership in our country. Art created by the people received the respect it deserves."<sup>25</sup> Historical folk dances came to be performed in the imperial courts through the process of field collection and reworking. Although this was a process of going from folk culture toward a higher aesthetic significance, at the same time it also implied that dances in which the people had been the subjects turned into those in which aristocratic pleasure became the subject, even to the point that they became detached from the people. Yet, the people's line that was promulgated after the Yan'an New Yangge movement took the people as the core of national folk dance's existence and development. Although dances of the folk underwent revision by professional artists, they still retained the people as their subject, because the target audience of these staged performances was the entire society and not some specific group. Taking the people as subject, various national folk dance traditions were wholly developed, lending the national folk dance of the 1950s a richness that was deeply widespread. This widespread and deep richness cannot be compared with the past, for it truly continues and returns to the original color of national folk dance.

Another aspect of the canonicity of national folk dance choreography in the 1950s is that following the literature and arts path initiated by the New Yangge movement, the choreography achieved a true "sublimation." Regarding national folk dance choreography during the period of the New Yangge movement and frontier dance, it was more the conscious exploration of a small number of individual artists. Yet the dance artists of the 1950s began to collectively and consciously participate in the excavation, organization, and creation of national folk dance, turning it into a systematic artistic project. This kind of sublimation of national folk dance uses artistic methods to produce "canonization," with a large degree of influence from Soviet and Eastern European dance models. In 1954, Igor Moiseyev visited China and specifically discussed principles for collecting, organizing, and reworking national dances. He believed that the responsibility of professional dancers was that "if they devote themselves to researching national dance materials and the coordination and rhythms of national dance, grasping the developmental process of national dance, they will be able to select from any kind of material those things that especially clearly reflect national character and then use their own creation to expedite and assist dance's development." Therefore, the "national character" refined by professional artists became the primary principle of folk dance creation, and the "expediting" of folk dance's development gave professional artists an important position. And because of this,



Moiseyev especially emphasized folk dances found in life. He believed not only that “the power of folk dance lies in the fact that these dances reflect people’s lives, customs and habits, and labor” but also that “how individual professional folk dance directors develop folk dance is not a particularly important issue, what is important is how folk dance develops in life and among the people.”<sup>26</sup> From this, what we see is the “canonizing” creative method of refining national character on the basis of a deep understanding of folk dance. Next is the introduction of the Western dance education system, namely, the replication in China of the ballet and character dance pedagogical system discussed earlier. Character dance within narrative ballets was formed by using the aesthetic principles of classical ballet to reform European folk dance; it is a “canonization” within the aesthetic standard of classical ballet. This model led the canonization of Chinese national folk dance similarly to absorb the aesthetic principles of classical dance (including classical ballet and Chinese classical dance) to attain “elegance by removing the vulgar.” For example, the aforementioned *Peacock Dance* was believed to “relatively successfully employ ballet technique and thereby elevated Dai folk dance.”

From this we can see that during the 1950s as a whole, national folk dance choreography improved greatly in artistry and standardization. The degree of innovation also greatly increased, truly moving from the folk realm into the halls of fine art. However, the core success of this kind of “sublimation” was not in “canonization” itself but rather in that, while “canonizing,” it maintained the continuity of national folk dance. It should be said that, in the early period of establishing China’s contemporary dance system, our understanding of the Western dance culture and system introduced by the Soviet Union was very elementary and was far from rising to a theoretical comprehension. Instead, guided by political ideas, we regarded it as “advanced” socialist culture and accepted it, and we also unconsciously used foreign cultural standards to examine and evaluate our own dance culture. Later, in the field of traditional culture, China began to pursue a long-term principle of “integrating China and the West.” This principle has already deeply permeated China’s contemporary system of traditional dance. However, the influence of this principle was still not fully visible in national folk dance choreography of the 1950s. In the high-spirited nationalist mood that followed the establishment of New China, one can imagine that artists were proud of their national folk dance art. At that time, the majority of choreographers were committed to the Yan’an path in literature and the arts. They had a

sincere love for the people and deeply respected national folk dance art, so they were able to really go deep into the folk to grasp the firsthand information. Their choreography grew directly from the “root” of national folk dance and really absorbed the essence of folk dance culture. This is very different from many national folk dance choreographies today that are created on the basis of secondhand or thirdhand “castle in the air”-type foundations. Thus, the “sublimation” of national folk dance choreography in the 1950s was filled with vitality and life because it remained tightly bound to national aesthetic sentiments. Apart from the works analyzed in this book, such as *Running Donkey* (*Pao lu* 跑驴), *Plate Dance* (*Panzi wu* 盘子舞), *Flower Drum Dance* (*Huagu wu* 花鼓舞), *Reba on the Grassland* (*Caoyuan shang de reba* 草原上的热巴), and *Dragon Dance* (*Long wu* 龙舞), just looking at the names of most of the works, they all show a simple folkloric nature. I think this is also why today the techniques of many national folk dance choreographers have already become more complex and mature, yet we still can't help feeling nostalgic for the classic 1950s. It's because we can no longer return to that simple yet passion-filled time, that time of being spiritually self-sufficient and appreciating natural beauty.

Regarding the creative methods of national folk dance in the 1950s, two areas are especially prominent. First, they learned from Soviet and Eastern European countries' experience of organizing and reworking folk dances. The mature system of character dance in ballet was established and perfected in Russia, where it became a practically effective method for reforming traditional folk dance through the aesthetic principles of ballet, as well as a set of dance types representing national and ethnic aesthetic styles. Of course, because the extended and elegant aesthetic style of ballet permeated it, ballet character dance was quite different stylistically and formally when compared with authentic folk dance. For example, ballet's emphasis on stability in the body's core is clearly in conflict with the relaxed and natural style of most folk dances. The organization and reworking of folk dances in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was influenced by the stage art-ification of character dance in ballet. However, re-worked folk dances also has a lot of differences from character dance in ballet. To a great extent, it maintained the aesthetic subjectivity of folk dance itself, and the faithful purification and beautification did not cause a major deviation in its aesthetic style. Influenced greatly by this model of creation, national folk dance in the 1950s was very respectful toward folk culture, yet its artistic sublimation of stage art was also notable. For this reason, Zi Huayun believes that “before the

Cultural Revolution most national dance choreography refined its special aesthetic qualities from authentic movement materials on a foundation of going deeply into the folk masses to study (conducting fieldwork) and then injected the spirit of the times into it—giving it a new meaning and shaping new dance images. Historical analysis of national dances from this period shows that they possess an innovative and pioneering significance that cannot be ignored—the unprecedented sublimation of the dances of the ‘lower class’ into exquisite stage works and their return to the people for the latter’s enjoyment.”<sup>27</sup> She pointed out further that this kind of national folk dance creation, while not yet theoretically proposed and proven at the time, actually already belonged to socialist culture. This kind of cultural belonging was clearly in line with the socialist culture of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries at that time.

Second, national folk dance choreographers absorbed the creative methods of traditional Chinese culture and expressed clear Chinese characteristics. National folk dance choreography of the 1950s was not simply the arrangement and composition of folk dance materials; it possessed a strong level of artistic innovation. In dances such as *Pasture Horse*, *Straw Hat Dance*, and *Harvest Song*, the combination of dance and working life not only allowed for the innovative development of national folk dance vocabulary but also had a flavor of contemporary life. Additionally, in their artistic innovations choreographers were deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, especially techniques of using analogy and metaphor in classical Chinese literature. *Red Silk Dance* and *Peacock Dance* are both typical examples in which the self-confidence and self-sufficiency of the Chinese people in the new era are conveyed by “using things to express ideas” and “using objects to arouse emotion.” This is a method unique to Chinese art and is not found in the folk dance models of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. National folk dance choreography of the 1950s shimmered brightly on the world dance scene not only because of its nationally distinctive dance vocabularies but also because of our unique artistic expression.

Regarding national folk dance choreography in the 1950s, Zi Huayun not only emphasized its clear degree of artistic innovation but also pointed out that alongside abundant creation there was also a tendency toward sameness and routinization. It should be noted that under the constraint of the strong mainstream culture of the 1950s, the creative space for choreographers of national folk dance had limits. The background of dance education they received was also quite consistent, especially in the early days when

they were almost all trained in a uniform “collective” style, which, of course, resulted in a relatively homogeneous creative outlook. However, the pure canonization model also highlighted the beauty of simplicity and the cultural diversity of the various national folk dance styles.

The idea of people’s art, nationalism, and the creative model of “canonization” was the troika supporting and leading forward the canonicity of national folk dance choreography in the 1950s, and this resulted in a high artistic level that was natural and fresh, exciting and inspiring. It is saddening to note that such a vibrant creative situation of national folk dance was soon distorted by the extreme political line. The Yan’an path in literature and arts developed to the extreme and became a politically oriented cultural monopoly. During the Cultural Revolution, national folk dance choreographers and dance inheritors both experienced persecution. Because it inherited traditional culture, national folk dance was criticized as behind the times. Chinese national folk dance, which had just achieved the status of a respected art, in an instant again lost its foothold, leaving the fire of the “models” nearly all that remained in those cold winter years.

### 2.1.3. The Release of Suppressed Emotion and the Revival of Natural Sentiments

China’s dance and other literature and arts fields endured ten years of catastrophe during the Cultural Revolution. After it was over, a great liberation of the spirit brought with it the beginnings of renewal. Like melting ice and snow, long-suppressed emotions gradually flowed into surging waters. The arrest of the Gang of Four<sup>28</sup> unleashed celebration across the country. With a heightened sense of the preciousness of time and years lost, people turned their attention to one thing—their own happiness. Emotion became the major content in dance performances of this period. A new wave of national folk dance choreography emerged that, in different ways, embodied the sense of exultation following disaster.

*Watching Lanterns* (*Guan deng* 观灯) was one outstanding example of this new trend. In it, the choreographer Leng Maohong adapted varied elements from Sichuan traditional arts, with the foundation being *maozi hua* 帽子花 (literally, “hat flowers”), a Sichuan folk dance. The choreography also incorporated movements from a local Sichuan theater form called *huadeng* 花灯 (“flower lantern”) and *bianlian* 变脸 (“face changing”), a tech-



Fig. 13. *Watching Lanterns*, 1978. Performed by Sichuan Provincial Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Shen Jinxiao.

nique from Sichuan opera. Together, they built a witty piece with strong Sichuan flavor. Describing the dance, Tian Jing highlighted its deeper symbolic meanings:

Although there are no actual lanterns onstage, from the dancers' eyes, movements, and attitudes, and from the constant changes in the shapes of the straw hats atop their heads, the audience seems to see the "clam shell lantern," "lion lantern," "galloping horse lantern," "crab lantern," and other colored lantern images. They can also see the crowded, lively atmosphere and landscape of the lantern market. Inspired by the scene and the lanterns, the dancers improvise a farce in which four clown characters create havoc that ends in catastrophe.<sup>29</sup>

The crowds and liveliness in the lantern market are a microcosm of the recovery of China's entire society, while "enjoying the scene" and "watching the lanterns" here reflect people's renewed interest in life. The improvised performance by the four clown characters gives the work a satirical and comedic color and carries a deep imprint of that special era. Critic Gu Feng wrote, "I like the dance *Watching Lanterns* because it aligned with the people's mental state of relief and lightness after the fall of the 'Gang of Four'; its jocular and lively mood released the voice of the people."<sup>30</sup> This commentary reflected a common view at the time. Of course, when we see *Watching Lanterns* today, we do so at a temporal distance. We are no longer living through the period of post-Cultural Revolution revival and the emotions that accompanied it. Yet, the distinctive elements refined from national folk dance that are embedded in *Watching Lantern* still leave a deep impression on us today. Those continuous fast-paced dance movements of alternating the straw hat flowers, which are lively and comical, possess a special folkloric character and creativity. Compared with the handling of the four clowns, which spoke more directly to the era, the choreographer Leng Maohong's contribution to organizing and reworking national folk dance has greater lasting value.

For a while, many national folk dance choreographies expressed post-Cultural Revolution emotion, with examples such as *Burn Festival Torches* (*Ranshao ba, jieri de huoba* 燃烧吧, 节日的火把), *Elation* (*Xinhua nufang* 心花怒放), and *Bronze Drum Dance* (*Tonggu wu* 铜鼓舞). The dance materials and styles in these choreographies are all different. Yet, they all in some way "applied mechanically" the exultant post-Cultural Revolution mood as a backdrop to express similarly bright and cheerful scenes. Flaming festival lanterns and thundering bronze drums all became symbols of different communities enjoying a new life after the toppling of the Gang of Four. As in *Watching Lanterns*, there is often a simple correspondence between the passionate mood and the meaning of the times. However, what is more notable in these works is the choreographers' refinement of fresh movements from national folk dance through a careful observation of life. For example, the sweeping skirt movements in *Burn Festival Torches* have now become a widely used technique in Yi nationality dance, receiving widespread acceptance and approval. From this perspective, both *Watching Lanterns* and *Burn Festival Torches* continued the strong tradition of national folk dances of the 1950s.

The large number of national folk dance choreographies that took post-Cultural Revolution joy and passion as their theme followed a larger pat-

tern of the era. Moreover, the prevalence of this theme indeed reflected a social reality. Nearly everyone in China had personally experienced painful years during the Cultural Revolution, and the outburst of artists' emotions after a long period of repression became an internal motivation for artistic creation as a whole. Li Zhengkang 李正康 explained, "During the period of the Gang of Four, choreographers and performers were attacked and persecuted under fabricated accusations. Celebrating the victory of the people and the second liberation of the nation, they created their art with tears of exhilaration. Their passion was reflected in their art, which was sincere and lifelike and full of vitality."<sup>31</sup> For this reason, it is clear that during the period following the end of the Cultural Revolution, the expression of emotions itself became a driver for the creation of national folk dance. Choreographers searched for movement archetypes that corresponded to their inner feelings and then developed and created on this basis. The internal feelings here were, of course, not limited to joy and excitement but included a variety of complex emotions in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. In this process of searching for a movement vocabulary to "take the place of language" for emotions, many of the resulting national folk dance choreographies turned to relatively simple feelings of thrill and delight.

Of course, in the national folk dance choreography that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution, it was more than emotion that was liberated. Choreographers gained the impulse and inspiration to create, and this opened up new spaces in national folk dance choreography, bringing renewed vitality. The literature and arts policy that had been distorted during the Cultural Revolution once again returned to the correct track of Yan'an literature and arts policy. Criticisms of the distorted dance aesthetics, which appeared after the Cultural Revolution, in fact represented a return to the literature and art of Chairman Mao and Marxist-Leninism. Liang Lun 梁伦 asserted, "Regarding the national heritage of China and foreign countries, Chairman Mao has long advocated the policy of 'make the past serve the present, make the foreign serve China' and 'let one hundred flowers bloom, weed through the old to bring forth the new.' This policy has proven successful in practice. The 'Gang of Four' tampered with, distorted, and destroyed this policy, causing severe damage to national folk dance."<sup>32</sup> After a long period of silence and repression, the once distorted national folk dance choreography thus returned to its original track. People were unanimous and fierce in their criticism of the long period of cultural despotism. Such criticism then led to another interesting and prominent trend

in national folk dance choreography: the “flowers, birds, fish, and insects” phenomenon. As recounted by dance historians Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, all at once “lyrical dances on the theme of flowers, birds, fish, and insects that were once treated as ‘feudal, capitalist, and revisionist’ and consigned to limbo reappeared in the limelight, resulting in radiant dances of diverse styles.”<sup>33</sup> The revival of national folk dance choreography was thus reflected not only in mood, but also in the new richness of subject matter. The “flowers, birds, fish, and insects” phenomenon became a symbol of breaking the shackles of cultural despotism. In newspapers and magazines, people seriously discussed whether “birds, flowers, fish and insects” were destroying the foundation of the socialist economy. Wang Yuanlin 王元麟 wrote:

Since ancient times, different peoples have, due to their varied living practices, attributed culturally specific aesthetic values to various kinds of flowers, birds, fish, and insects. For example, the Dai toward peacocks, the Han toward plum blossoms, etc. People’s love and artistic appreciation of these flora and fauna is a celebration and affirmation of their own laboring life. Therefore, with regard to the economic foundation of society, its artistic expression is not only not a negative factor but is a positive factor. It leads people to love life, their people, and their country.<sup>34</sup>

On the one hand, this kind of earnest discussion of the “flowers, birds, fish, and insects” issue demonstrates the seriousness of cultural despotism during the Cultural Revolution period. On the other hand, such discussion also shows that a fresh sentimentality and orientation toward the natural world was undergoing revival in national folk dance choreography. The more people argued passionately for the political rationality of “birds, flowers, fish, and insects,” the more they revealed their longing for tranquility. After those radical and turbulent years, the traumatized mind needed to enjoy a rare peace and calm, and this was reflected in renewed appreciation for the small pleasures of life. National folk dance choreography emphasizing quotidian experiences came at just the right time. Exhibiting a simple and relaxed manner, these dances offered new interpretations of the meanings of ordinary life. In 1980, the Ministry of Culture and the Chinese Dancers Association jointly hosted the first all-China dance competition. In this competition, the works *Water* (*Shui* 水) and *Chasing the Fish* (*Zhui yu* 追鱼) each introduced a breath of fresh air and yielded brilliant results. Let’s take a look at the scene in *Water*:



An ordinary Dai girl carries a water jar to the river to draw water. With the afterglow of the sunset sprinkled on her face, she sees her beautiful figure in the water. Suddenly, a youthful joy emerges on her face. . . . She lets loose her beautiful long hair. The clear and bright river water washes her soft black hair until it is loose and glimmering. It cleanses away her exhaustion from the day until it vanishes without a trace. She sits on the shore and then, attracted by the sparkling water, she jumps in to play. A light breeze comes and she caresses her clean and air-dried long hair. Then, she twists it into the distinctive Dai-style bun. The setting sun falls in the mountains, the sky alights with the burning evening sun. She traverses the sunset light, picks up the water jar, and ambles toward the bamboo cottages with smoke curling up from their stoves.<sup>35</sup>

What a tranquil portrait of life this is. Such a mood would have been difficult to imagine in earlier national folk dance choreography. Even today, when we jokingly refer to a comfortable lifestyle as “bourgeois,” we can still feel a shadow of that era. During the whiplash that followed the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, when people’s hearts craved innocence, a work like *Water* had a great opportunity to fill this desire. *Water* was indeed like a clear spring that washed away the gloom hanging in people’s hearts. This is why Wang Manli 王曼力, who authored the article cited above, compared watching *Water* to drinking a sip of refreshing water from the Dai people. Because of this, although the audience remains seated and watches the square stage space filled only with the body language of a solo dancer, they are able to imagine such a rich and beautiful scene. On the one hand, this makes us gasp at the strength of people’s inner worlds of imagination. On the other, it makes us think of the approachable and infectious power of ordinary life that exists within national folk dance choreography. Looking at its refinement of movements, we can see how *Water* penetrates into the ordinary details of life. Yang Guizhen 杨桂珍 writes,

Initially, *Water* employed drawing water, washing the hair, combing the hair, applying flowers, gazing into the water, picking flowers, and many other actions drawn from life. . . . In the end, the plot only retained three parts: drawing water, washing hair, and returning home. The iconic hair-washing section is the focus, and the washing hair movements are categorized into seven processes: unraveling, washing, tossing, sunbathing, shaking, tending, and rolling up. These actions determine the position of



Fig. 14. *Water*, 1980. Performed by Dao Meilan and Yunnan Provincial Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Shen Jinxiao.

the setting sun, how the dancer lays out her hair to soak up its warmth, the flowing of the river, and the angle of drying her hair.<sup>36</sup>

The Dai are a water people, and they regard water as an important part of life. Thus, Dai culture is filled with worship of water, longing for water, and attachment to water. This dance takes *Water* as its theme, which is quite a large topic. Yet the choreographer did not employ typical Dai folk dance to abstractly express the character of water. Instead, they chose a seemingly small detail from the life of a young girl washing her hair and then took exceptional care in refining and arranging each component. Portraying such a prosaic life detail as hair washing in such careful detail seems like making a fuss over something small. However, what makes *Water* touching and beautiful is not the movements of hair washing itself but the attitude toward life that is embodied in this behavior: a calm and relaxation like water flowing in

the hair, without a trace. A similar kind of peaceful emotion and mentality exists in traditional Dai culture. When we applaud the dancer Dao Meilan's 刀美兰 skill in twisting her hair into a bun while she spins, we may not realize that what really touches our hearts is this entire cultural heritage. A person walking amid thorns and darkness will be moved by seeing a patch of light in the distance or hearing the faint sound of a dog's bark; like in Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*, the main character, after the ups and downs of fate, realizes that simply "living" is the true meaning of life. The success of *Water* at such a time is certainly a gift of history. It should also draw our attention to the inheritance of intangible traditions in national folk dance choreography. When many focus on the passing down of external movements in national folk dance, and even show a willingness to replace the intangible cultural core, more may be lost. In terms of movement technique, *Water* is not a masterpiece. However, it is well regarded because it grasped something of the intangible tradition of emotion and mentality within Dai culture. It showed that the ordinary itself can be extraordinary.

The dance *Chasing the Fish* is also based on Dai folk dance. Its success at almost the same time as *Water* may prove that this phenomenon is not a coincidence. According to Chen Guo 陈帼 and Shen Dicai 沈迪才, the choreographer of this piece "studied and organized materials from the traditional fish dance of the Dai people. However, they did not stick to the imitation of fish and simply expressing the fish. Rather, by depicting a fun scene of chasing and playing between an anthropomorphized fish and an elderly Dai person, the piece vividly expressed the spirit of the Dai people and their interest in life today."<sup>37</sup> In my view, like in *Water*, what really moves people in *Chasing the Fish* is also that it presents a relaxed attitude toward life, except that in *Water* it is a quiet and serene flow, while in *Chasing the Fish* it is the fun of spraying and splashing. In *Water*, the feminine beauty of women has an "innate" appeal, and while the pairing of old and young in *Chasing the Fish* is not particularly effortless, its conception and composition are very clever. Tian Jing described *Chasing the Fish* in the following way:

An old Dai man was watching and catching fish beside a small river. He tried to catch a small fish several times without getting it, and the alert and mischievous fish was proud of itself. The experienced old man switched to the "cloudy water" method of catching fish with his bare hands, causing the frolicking fish to become dizzy and disoriented so that he could capture it. He happily clasped the small fish and headed



Fig. 15. *Chasing the Fish*, 1980. Performed by Central Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Shen Jinxiao.

home, almost as if he were walking with his own grandchildren. The naughty little fish had enough. She pretended to make a downcast look, but then peeped at the old man, and, suddenly, when he was not prepared, wriggled loose from the old man's hand and disappeared into the water. The old fisherman seemed to know that the little fish had such a trick, and he gladly let her swim away.<sup>38</sup>

The witty premise of *Chasing the Fish* is the anthropomorphic treatment of the small fish, which gives the fisherman a rival and makes the dance full of imagination and drama. In the battle of wits between man and fish, the dynamic and comedic dance movements take advantage of traditional Dai folk fish dance elements, giving the ancient fish dance a new presentation in this dramatic structure. Turning the fish into a person shows not only enjoyment of the pleasures of life but also an active search for fun in the ordinary. The battle between "person" and "fish" is actually a game between the person and their own psychology. The highlight of the game is that when the little fish finally escapes, the old fisherman seems to have the foreknowledge and

gives up without attachment. This incomparable gracefulness toward life's gains and losses makes *Chasing the Fish* evolve into an allegory of life. Therefore, *Chasing the Fish* reflects the wisdom of folk life, both in the choreography of the dance form and in the conceptualization of the story structure. This also makes us further realize that national folk dance choreography that becomes canonized does not have to display a lofty posture. Rather, the distillation of ordinary life by "seeing the large in the small" perhaps aligns more with the real nature of national folk dance.

*Water* and *Chasing the Fish*, which interpreted everyday sentiments and the zest for life, allowed people who had experienced the Cultural Revolution to return to real life as if coming back home after a long period of wandering. The fresh and natural mood of national folk dance creation was quickly revived. The dance *Catching Snails* (*Mo luo* 摸螺) is about Li children who catch snails in a river. As Tian Jing writes, "A group of Li girls, wearing short tube-like skirts, carrying small bamboo baskets on their hips, and dragging large wooden sandals, sing happily as they walk: 'Quick, quick, let's go together to catch snails.'"<sup>39</sup> Chen Qiao continued to demonstrate her specialty of capturing movement dynamics from life. Chen combined the adorable movements "left hand left foot, right hand right foot" of a child wearing wooden sandals with the movement patterns that use same-side coordination in Li dance. This really captured people's attention. The dance also designed simple and amusing situations of catching snails and crabs as well as the vivid space of small bridges overlooking a flowing stream. The childlike movements and more diverse compositional methods revealed a natural and relaxed state of mind in national folk dance choreography in this period. It also showed people a more active creative inspiration and a more fresh and natural direction in national folk dance. Since then, in this series of fresh and natural national folk dance choreographies, ever more innovative and artistic creative methods have appeared. *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* (*Cai sang wangui* 采桑晚归) is just such a typical "pastoral piece." As documented in an article in *Dance* magazine by Sun Hongmu 孙红木, the choreographer's creative inspiration came from moving idyllic scenery:

South of the Yangtze water towns, green carpet-like rice fields, jasper-like fish ponds, green silk-like rivers, how dazzling. More amusing, there is the endless mulberry forest, like a green cloud blanketing a flat field, showing infinite colors of spring, everything here is full of poetry . . . dotted with feelings like a trickle of water constantly gathering, constantly



Fig. 16. *Catching Snails*, 1986. Performed by Guangdong Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Shen Jinxiao.

pushing me to start this creative inspiration. In the water country of Jiangnan, summoned by its beauty and sentiments, there appeared the solo dance *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries*.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike *Water* and *Chasing the Fish*, *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* did not draw on specific movements from working life. Rather, the title refers to one's soaring mental state on the way home. As described in the text above, the choreographer's creation was born of the beauty and sentiments of water towns south of the Yangtze River, and the extremely picturesque scenery stimulated the choreographer's own idyllic experience. Therefore, the composition style in *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* is not realistic but instead focuses on creating an ideaspcape. Even though it incorporates



Fig. 17. *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries*, 1982. Performed by Zhejiang Provincial Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Shen Jinxiao.

some movements that are more pedestrian and related to labor, it is also virtual and imaginative. In particular, the choreographer designed as a typical prop the bamboo pole, and its varied use fully reflects this. Wu Lusheng 吴露生 writes:

The bamboo pole decorated with mulberry leaves is a product of selection and typicalization of everyday phenomena. When riding in the boat, the bamboo becomes a “vaulting pole,” like a “paddle” that uses the foot to replace the hand; when lost in thought it further becomes a “silkworm screen,” and later it also symbolizes the “waves” and a “carrying

pole.” The prop shifts between imitation and non-imitation, producing a sweet aftertaste and an overflowing joy of life. Worthy of praise is that the choreographer is not simply using the prop as a gimmick disconnected from the thematic ideas, but deliberately creates “unity between emotion and scenery, meaning and image.” The dotting and stirring of the “vaulting pole” and the swaying and swinging of the “paddle” are full of rhythm and cleverly integrate the prop’s changes of shape with the dancer’s movements. Each reflects the other and gives people a sense of beauty in following the body shapes. The “silkworm screen” formed from the bamboo pole’s circling actions transports people’s thoughts to the quiet and warm silkworm lodge on the opposite riverbank; the appearance of “waves” vividly depicts the character’s inner world: the girl’s thoughts as she returns on the boat are like the rippling silver waves under the early moon floating toward the silkworm lodge.<sup>41</sup>

From this description, we can see that the use of the bamboo pole in *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* becomes an exciting highlight of the entire work. In terms of visual form, the pole’s shifting between long straight lines and soft curved lines enriches the visual composition of the stage and enhances the viewing experience. In terms of psychological resonance, the constant transformation of the bamboo pole into different objects, such as “vaulting pole,” “silkworm screen,” “wave,” and “carrying pole,” gives the prop a multidimensional expressive potential and makes it assume the important function of communicating and creating meaning. The gorgeous scenery of water towns south of the Yangtze River is “dotted” by the prop, and the emotion associated with the water town is also expressed by the dancer through the prop. The “scenery” and “emotion” both revolve around and emerge from the prop, while the dancing body symbolizes “people” who wander and indulge in them. This intertwined relationship between “people,” “scenery,” and “emotion” gives *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* a much stronger artistic aura than most national folk dances, just like the difference between a poem and a simple folk song on the same theme.

The use of props, in particular, was a major breakthrough in how props were employed in traditional Chinese national folk dance. Chinese national folk dance has a deep tradition of props, which has evolved into a distinctive feature. Props in traditional Chinese national folk dances are typically objects with specific cultural functions and meanings, but in the long-term historical development, such functions and meanings gradually fade or even



disappear. Then, the props accumulate together with the dance to become a concentrated national culture and aesthetic form. The bamboo pole decorated with mulberry leaves in *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* is not a traditional folk dance prop but rather a newly created one. The choreographer inherited the method of dancing with props but did not inherit the traditional props themselves. The way the choreographer employed the prop also overcame previous limitations, as the prop is no longer an “object handed down” with a set cultural connotation as found in traditional folk dances. Rather, it actually enacts emotional communication between the character and scenery in the choreography, becoming like a character in the dance and even an “intelligent object” for the choreographer’s expression. With regard to this method, the choreographer stated, “For example, the use of props—this method of extending and strengthening the character’s emotions is actually an artistic technique in traditional Chinese art known as expressing emotions through objects and conveying meanings through objects. . . . Both are used under the guidance of employing traditional aesthetic concepts to resolve the relationship between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real.’”<sup>42</sup> From this, we can see the choreographer’s attention to and conscious application of Chinese traditional aesthetics. Whether “expressing emotions through objects,” “conveying meanings through objects,” or “mutual engendering of the virtual and the real,” all are classical concepts in Chinese traditional aesthetics, all confirm a new use of traditional props, and all exceed the typical realm of folk culture. The choreographer’s use of this kind of aesthetic outlook to guide national folk dance choreography will necessarily raise the artistic status of folk dance. Fortunately this aesthetic outlook is an authentic Chinese tradition, so while raising the status of folk dance it also preserves its Chinese cultural significance.

Apart from this, the choreographer also added more individual understanding and creation to the human character image in the dance. As described by Sun Hongmu, it “places the eye-catching parts of the choreography on this very ordinary person, while also striving to reveal the extraordinary moral character in their soul.” So, the human character image in *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries* is actually “the individuality within this commonality. When the villagers’ beliefs and personalities are integrated into the work with the choreographer’s own thoughts, feelings, temperament, and qualities, the work then has individuality,” Sun writes.<sup>43</sup> We can compare the character portrayal in this piece with the early dance *Pasture Horse* by Jia Zuoguang. In *Pasture Horse*, the herder image Jia Zuoguang

created is a character type, a typical image extracted from shared commonalities of the group, a combination of all the commonalities. Of course, this typical image is also a blending of community and individuality, but clearly the aspect of commonality is much greater. Because Jia Zuoguang penetrated more into the life of the group, and more importantly, he integrated into this commonality, he worked hard to choreograph with the emotions and understanding of the Mongol people. Yet in a work like *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries*, the choreographer is no longer fully satisfied with refining and to a large degree reproducing the group commonality. Instead, they search for more individuality and use their own perspective and understanding to create. As a result, the image also carries more of the artist's own personal understanding, feelings, and imagination.

From this phenomenon we can see an increasing tendency in national folk dance choreography from the continuation of group values toward the pursuit of artistic individuality. In other words, national folk dance no longer completely embodied common traditional models, but possessed an individuality blended with the choreographer's own ideas, feelings, temperament, and attainment. Yu Ping explains this creative phenomenon as "the 'internalization of the development process' of 'stylized' movements, i.e. 'stylized movements' that have accumulated historical and social aesthetic consciousness undergoing adjustment through the aesthetic personality and mental structure of the creative subject until they change in form and rhythm."<sup>44</sup> Because the choreographer's own attitude and emotions adjusted the stylized movements in national folk dance, they underwent corresponding change, both preserving common stylistic characteristics and adding individualized feelings. Of course, at this time individual feelings still had a relatively limited impact and infectiousness within the stylistic character of traditional national folk dance.

In Chinese national folk dance choreography of the early post-Cultural Revolution period, "emotion" and "nature" emerged as two important themes. The former became an internal driver of artists' choreography, and the latter emerged as the works' external formal style. These two themes, of course, are basic elements of national folk dance. The strong emotional tension in national folk dance has always been what makes it most capable of moving people, while the pastoral and peaceful nature depicted in national folk dance appeals to the enduring attraction of farming culture and aesthetics. Although the elements have not changed, the increasingly open society has given choreographers more creative freedom, and this has provided national

folk dance more room for development and change as well. Although people occasionally mention political implications, in actual creation, the pursuit of art itself is increasing, and works that shallowly express political content are gradually decreasing. What is worthy of note is that during this period, in the many discussions about national folk dance choreography, a clear tendency appeared toward “desiring change.” With the revival of literature and art, different values and aesthetic consciousness that had long suffered confinement started to be released. The speed and degree of release, of course, varied among individual choreographers. Yet, without exception, they all responded strongly in their consciousness of innovation with a desire to overcome the usual methods and patterns of the past. For example, Ying Li 英力 proposed to structure a new folk dance that was “similar but not similar.” Ying wrote, “I think that after mastering these materials, we can use them as reference and then add a simple plot or image-scape to structure a new folk dance that is similar but not similar, ‘with a completely new look.’”<sup>45</sup> For example, Zhao Guozheng 赵国政 put forth the “straw transforms into milk” theory: “regarding national folk dance choreography, when creators absorb nutrients from life and study and master original dance materials, they must follow the rules and conscientiously avoid making major changes, this is what’s known as ‘seeking to conform and find sameness’; yet, when you get into artistic creation, you can’t just be satisfied with minor rearrangement of original things, let alone piling up and setting out some movements and calling it a work. Instead, we should strive to create, develop, and innovate, that is to say ‘seeking departure and transformation.’”<sup>46</sup>

Thinking like this was very common at the time. When we look at dance articles written in that period, whether they are theoretical interpretations or reflections on creative practice, the “critical inheritance approach” is almost ubiquitous. After the Cultural Revolution, the return to the Yan’an line in literature and arts and Mao Zedong’s thoughts on literature and arts actually continued the critical inheritance of national folk dance traditions, and national folk dance continued to be the object of transformation. However, it can be seen that after national folk dance entered the creative field, it was guided by the theory of critical transformation and driven by the practice of a creative desire to constantly break through old practices. When the freedom of creation is greater, people no longer are satisfied with the simple “working procedure” of studying-organizing-reworking but rather pursue more innovation. It’s just that at this time, people were not yet really aware that in this pursuit, the scale of “departure” and “transformation” may gradually become blurred and lead to losing one’s way.

In fact, a new possibility for national folk dance choreography already appeared in some other dance works. In the late 1970s Jiang Huaxuan 蒋华轩 created *The Unbreakable String* (*Ge bu duan de qinxian* 割不断的琴弦), which used praise of Zhang Zhixin's 张志新 devotion to ideals to reflect on the Cultural Revolution. This is not a work of national folk dance in the strict sense. However, what is quite worth paying attention to is that Jiang Huaxuan used a lot of national folk dance elements in it. As Jiang explains,

For example, in Zhang Zhixin's allusion-filled "fire dance" in *The Unbreakable String*, I used the water sleeves of Tibetan dance and the shaking sleeves of Chinese theater to show the small fire; I also used the Yi cape dance with added ballet turns and the high kicks in foreign folk dances to show the big fire. . . . Moreover, I learned that what is more important in this development and innovation is that it must begin from the character. In other words, regardless of whether dance materials and expressive forms are ancient or modern, Chinese or foreign, as long as they are suitable for the character's emotions and expression of content, they can all be used. Transform what can be used, temporarily abandon what does not fit, and add development and creation to what is lacking.<sup>47</sup>

The mixture of all sorts of dance elements here is surprising, with folk dances of different nationalities, Chinese traditional theater, ballet, and foreign folk dances all merged into a single dance segment by a single character. What unifies these different elements is the character's emotion. The criteria for selecting the creative elements is not what kind of dance they belong to but whether they are suitable for expressing the emotions of the character. In another work by Jiang Huaxuan, *Wedding at the Execution Ground* (*Xingchang shang de hunli* 刑场上的婚礼), this method is even more apparent. Jiang explains,

For example, in the wedding dance in *Wedding at the Execution Ground*, I borrowed the distinctive rhythm of Xinjiang's "chékitme," which has unique expressive power, and then modified it by using the "Dolan" step. This kind of step is used in some ceremonies (including weddings), and the steps give people a feeling of calmness and solemnity. Because a wedding in an execution ground is out of the ordinary, it is a kind of noble battle. In addition, in the duet to the theme song, I absorbed some materials of Korean dance. Through some development and changes, I

turned the inward and reserved Korean dance into an expression of the profound understated emotion of a revolutionary couple.<sup>48</sup>

*Wedding at the Execution Ground's* use of national folk dance is more multifaceted and profound. The original folkloric significance of the national folk dance elements almost disappeared completely. "Chékitme" rhythm turned into a kind of psychological rhythm of the marriage on the execution ground; "Dolan" steps gave out a solemn and lofty sense; the internal and reserved quality of Korean dance corresponded to the deep inner feelings of the main characters. Regarding these national folk dance elements, the national aesthetic psychology sedimented through history now becomes concretely embodied in specific characters. Although far from the folk culture atmosphere, the typical character and emotional traits in the movement elements are still striking. Jiang writes,

Although these movements are absorbed from various national folk dances, right now these movements have already lost their original stylistic characteristics and are well suited to the needs of the new characters. These new characters also have their specific national belongings. The national quality of this kind of dance style is still evident, but it is no longer applied to the original concept.<sup>49</sup>

In the late 1970s, when the spread and influence of Western modern dance in China was still extremely limited, national folk dance was still an important source of dance creation. In these two works, we see a significant transformation of national folk dance. In other words, within choreography, there was a major breakthrough in the inheritance of national folk dance. The original stylistic characteristics were excised for the sake of creating characters, and new dance forms and styles began to emerge, which we can hardly identify as national folk dances anymore. However, this approach to choreography opened up a new way to transform folk dance to fit characters and emotion. The aesthetic style of the ethnic group gives way to the emotional needs of individual characters, which actually means that the way of expressing emotions has changed: one is no longer expressing emotion within national folk dance; rather, one is choosing and transforming national folk dance in accordance with the emotion one wants to express. Emotion has changed from an "appendage" embedded in national folk dance to a "master" that transforms

folk dance. Although these two works are not national folk dances in the strict sense, this approach began to emerge in the subsequent creation of national folk dances and gradually went further. In his own account, Jiang Huaxuan repeatedly emphasizes the connection between his works and “national folk,” which reflects the controversy and conflict in ideas at that time. Feng Shuangbai believes there are two reasons for this kind of debate and controversy, one of which is that “in contemporary Chinese dance history, ‘creating dance on the foundation of national folk dance’ was once a policy for creation and was declared to be the path of dance art. As a result, whether or not national dance style was pure, or folk dance materials were used correctly, for a long period of time was the most important standard for evaluating art.” The other reason is that before Wu Xiaobang and Dai Ailian, “China’s music and dance creators rarely expressed an artist’s personal views, opinions, ideas, judgements or even emotions.”<sup>50</sup> If we say that the first reason is the “box,” then the second reason is “Pandora.” The box is a normative and restrictive requirement, while Pandora is an inner urge to break the norm and restriction. Of course, “Pandora” here is not derogatory, but the Pandora’s box of national folk dance creativity has been opened, and who could have predicted how much surprise this would bring?

Another direction worthy of consideration is that amid the eager expectation of innovative development in the new era, our deep understanding and real mastery of tradition largely remained in words only. While denying the cultural tyranny of the Cultural Revolution, people did not really reflect on the past process of cultural construction from the perspective of traditional culture, nor did they have the time or mood to repair the traditional culture that had been devastated. Quite the opposite, the ensuing eager expectation for the “four modernizations” made the transformation of folk dances immediately move forward in another modern way. In fact, Lan-Lan Wang (Wang Xiaolan 王晓蓝), an American dance figure who came to China relatively early and observed the creation of folk dances, said of the new forms of Chinese dance: “I think China’s dance can be divided into three parts. One, ancient dances like Tibetan opera. Two, dance that expresses national and folk traditions. Three, dance that expresses today’s China. These three parts must be separated clearly and shouldn’t be blended together.”<sup>51</sup> This actually addressed the issue of the multiple levels of unadorned national folk dance. Yet, in the development of national folk dance creation since then, there has been no serious conceptual and practical distinction among the different levels.

#### 2.1.4. The Recovery and Resurgence of Passionate Idealism

In China during the turn from the 1970s to the 1980s, emotional release and idyllic tranquility were only suitable for a brief rest after a painful journey. More ideals seething with excitement, deeper thoughts, and more passionate emotions followed. One of the more important characteristics of the 1980s was that China, which had undergone historical shocks, was like a youth who had just awakened from a nightmare in the early morning, who looked at the dawn in the sky through a gaze filled with restless stirring and a burst of longing. Under the political guidance of strong modernization and the direction of rapid social and economic development, some fervent Chinese folk dance works emerged during this period. With their passionate idealism and pursuit of art they sounded the strongest note of the times.

The 1980 choreography *Sea Waves* (*Hailang* 海浪) was a very unique phenomenon. Jia Zuoguang, now nearing sixty, exploded again with creative passion. Unlike his earlier pursuit of pure Mongol folk dance, in *Sea Waves* he used a new outlook to show a kind of momentum of battling with the waves. Faced with the new era, the 1980s mentality was like that of the swallow soaring among the waves, confidently and eagerly shouting, "Let the storm come harder!" So what we saw is this kind of dance image, as described by Feng Shuangbai,

A sea swallow soars on outstretched wings. It spreads its two wings and sweeps low across the sea. Suddenly, it turns into a curling wave, pearls fly in all directions, it crests and falls, the spinning, rolling, soft wave. The "sea swallow" dances against the wind, shaking its wings; the arms are suddenly soft like a spring willow, then suddenly angular; the body of the "wave" rises to the sky and then crashes to the ground.<sup>52</sup>

*Sea Waves* led a revival of passionate ideals and embodied a change in the language style of national folk dance amid this new emotional outpouring. The use of both arms to imitate the wings of the swallow and the rise and fall of the waves showed a strong character of Mongol folk dance arm movements, and the fluctuating rhythm between the sea swallow and the wave also shows the unique temporal difference between stillness and movement in the "dodging motion." The use of Mongolian folk dance, derived from inland grassland culture, to express the moving scene of sea swallows soaring above ocean waves is a giant leap in cultural environment. Jia Zuoguang



Fig. 18. *Sea Waves*, 1980. Performed by Liu Wengang of Beijing Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Ye Jin.

demonstrates many other innovations in this work, such as by having the same dancer portray the roles of “sea swallow” and “wave,” by integrating difficult technique into the performance content, and by developing and utilizing low-level space. These innovations made *Sea Waves* a rather “unusual” work at that time. Jia Zuoguang obviously leaned more toward his identity as an “artist” here, generating a new stage image that was an extension of his strong foundation in national folk dance but that did not belong to the grasslands and exceeded the scope of traditional folk dances. However, in the dance dynamics of the choreography, we can observe the profound imprint of Mongol folk dance on Jia Zuoguang’s body. In the passion and ideals expressed in the piece, we can also see commonalities between the grassland and the sea: the line between heaven and earth and the line between sea and sky alike outline a vast and far-reaching space. These both align with the dance style of magnanimity and extension fostered by grassland culture. In *Sea Waves*, we see not only the meaning of national folk dance culture radiate with new life in the new period but also the possibilities for change in national folk dance choreography onstage in the new era.

Coincidentally, the 1986 work *Gallop* (*Benteng* 奔腾) also used the dance





Fig. 19. *Gallop*, 1986. Performed by Jiang Tiehong and others of Central Minzu University. Photographer: Ye Jin.

culture of the grasslands to match the pulse of the new era. The dance, as the name suggests, surges forward with a force. It is a groundbreaking work of Mongol dance, but even more so it is a spiritual image of the 1980s collectively seething amid the trumpets of China's new policy of economic reform and opening up. In the dance, solo and group choreographies are always intertwined, corresponding to "one horse in the lead" and "ten thousand horses galloping." "Human" and "horse" seem to merge into one, full of vitality, with the majestic momentum of galloping like the wind, but also with the pleasure of leisurely strolling on the grassland. Feng Shuangbai writes,

An agile and brave Mongol rider raises the whip and speeds along as if the wind is steering his horse. . . . The group of dancers jump in from all directions, like ten thousand horses frolicking on the grassland pastures. . . . Riders loosen their reigns dancing as they please with great enthusiasm. . . . They spread out their arms into a line, creating the image of billowing waves moving up and down; using their toes as the central point of support, they curve the whole body dramatically rising and falling. . . . Music abruptly stops, and all the dancers suddenly hold their postures, freezing into a heroic sculpture of a group of grassland riders.<sup>53</sup>

It is worth noting that *Gallop* is a choreography created through teaching. From Ma Yue's 马跃 creative design, we can see his exploration at the level of movement in the classroom. The dance doesn't use the traditional horse step but tries to create a new horse step for the piece. Ma Wei 马薇 explains, "The choreographer, after thinking hard for a long while, cleverly used a large circling action of the lower body to create an unstoppable momentum, while the upper body twists and arches back dynamically to add strength; then, adding the movement of the two hands reigning in the horse, he generated the newly devised 'running step' (two feet chasséing forward in alternation) and used this as a theme movement."<sup>54</sup> It's clear that, while creating this work, Ma Yue's attention to traditional Mongol folk dance was focused on movement elements such as "momentum," "dynamics," "strength," and "drive," and the new thematic movements of *Gallop* emerged from the perspective of movement research. To a certain extent, this reflects a purer focus on movement in national folk dance pedagogy.

The choreographer did a good job of capturing the style of Mongol folk dance. So, in essence, *Gallop* is not far from the basic cultural characteristics of Mongol folk dance. The traditional Mongol costumes, typical three-part structure, and distinctive Mongol dance vocabulary all maintain this character. However, the overall image of the work appears to take on a new vitality as if reborn. In my opinion, the fundamental reason for this is that *Gallop* retained the basic Mongol folk dance form as a foundation but added subtle changes in cultural temperament. Traditional Mongol folk dance itself already has the magnanimous and expansive atmosphere of grassland culture. Yet, *Gallop* diluted the profundity of traditional culture and pushed pure passion to the extreme. More importantly, the piece incorporates a modern mentality and artistic imagery into the traditional Mongol

folk dance culture. In mentality, the whole dance is open and spontaneous, and the rhythm is from the heart. One has a sense that within excitement there is an added feeling of boiling blood and within relaxation there is a new unrestrained self-confidence. This makes it match the new mentality of 1980s China's modern society stepping into a new era. In artistry, the choreography elevates the imagery of the horse in Mongol dance. The dynamics of the horse are no longer a simple imitation of the ordinary emotions and movements of working life in folk contexts. Instead, they become the horse's soul singing, turning into an image of vitality and even of an entire people galloping. Therefore, the important breakthrough of *Gallop* for Mongol dance choreography is that it is not satisfied with the presentation of the national style in the typical sense. Rather, on this foundation it advances the transformation of Mongol dance into a stage art, while also matching the aspirations of the times. In his comparison of style in *Chasing the Fish* and *Gallop*, Yu Ping pointed out:

The change in zeitgeist between *Chasing the Fish* and *Gallop* became an important social and cultural phenomenon in the dance world. . . . People's mentality went from identifying with the Dai dance to pressing the interpretation of Mongol dance. I see this as the modification of "water culture" to "grass culture." . . . At the beginning of the new era, for those whose souls were thirsty after climbing out of a cultural desert, Dai dance was like a sweet spring that refreshed the heart. With the steadfast implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, for those whose spirit has been revived and is getting stronger, Mongol dance is like a potent herb giving the body new strength.

It is true that from the perspective of the social zeitgeist, the soothing function of "water culture" and the energizing function of "grass culture" were each selected because they grasped the pulse of different times. Behind them, national folk dance choreographers were becoming more and more self-aware and comfortable in adjusting their expressive orientation, and they did not limit themselves to the traditional styles and connotations of national folk dances. By spreading the wings of their souls, they were able to fly freely on the earth.

The 1988 choreography *Remains of Spring* (*Canchun* 残春) takes the tenacious and drawn-out Korean folk dance as its creative material. The image deeply engraved in people's mind is a strong and varied rhythm of



Fig. 20. *Remains of Spring*, 1988. Performed by Beijing Dance Academy. Photographer: Ye Jin.

the human body and an unrestrained vital passion through the pathos of singing. Like the last cry of spring, it is loud enough to arouse the insensible. Zhao Tiechun once described what he saw in *Remains of Spring* in a critical essay in this way:

The end of the dark, silent, bottomless abyss . . . a barefoot ghost floats in from afar; suddenly, with an “eruptive” roar, he leaps up and rises off the ground. Ah! He wants to fly, to fly toward what he longs for, to fly toward the call on the other shore, but falls heavily to the ground. This is, after all, a spirit that doesn’t dare to stay on earth forever. . . Suddenly, his body lying on the ground convulses and his arms form the shape of a mountain range. He raises the upper part of his chest high toward the sky, close to the sun; he uses both hands to grab the light, embracing the

universe with his whole body and mind. . . . An impassioned and vigorous sound like a gathering of bugle calls awakens this hopeless soul, and he stands up violently, like a lion shaking his mane or a spirited horse running wild, swiftly, manically, jumping and stabbing into the darkness, poking into the abyss, waving his strong, powerful arms to fight. . . . In that moment the boundless darkness seemed to open its mouth and the bottomless abyss opened its heart . . . , yet, he knelt on one knee at the front of the stage, his head raised high, gazing into the distance; then, very slowly, he buries his head low; when he raises his head high again, his pupils radiate a burning light—that brightness is something in the distance calling, calling, calling.<sup>55</sup>

In his entire poetic description, Zhao Tiejun's experience of *Remains of Spring* seems to transcend the level of specific techniques and is filled with surging emotion. In his descriptions, we see few traces of Korean dance, and everything is blurred into a holistic imagery. The earth, the mountains, the sky, the sun, the universe, and the abyss together build a grand scene, and hunting within it is an unruly mind. In fact, the components of the scenes are not abstract and difficult to understand but are all basic elements common in folk culture. However, when the mind is elevated to a higher level to look at this scene, what we see is no longer an unburdened folk culture but a more profound examination and reflection. Leaping, falling, spasming, fighting—what we see from these human movements is not really a folk-style display but the beating of the heart, which is a reluctant heart, a heart in persistent pursuit. In *Remains of Spring*, there is a philosophical reflection on life and fate. Fundamentally, though, the traditional folk dance culture does not have such a reflective function and is more of a passive cultural heritage. Therefore, works like *Remains of Spring* only appear when national folk dance choreography reaches a higher level. If national folk dance creation in the past was more about refining and beautifying the folk dance material itself, then when the choreographer's desire to really create art overwhelms the display of the folk dance culture itself, the traditional folk dance is bound to gradually become a pure means of artistic expression for the choreographer and quietly change onstage in accordance with the needs of this artistic expression. In *Returning Late from Picking Mulberries*, Sun Hongmu already tried to integrate the cultural "commonality" of national folk dance with the choreographer's own individual thoughts, feelings, temperament, and upbringing. By contrast, Sun Longkui 孙龙奎 is more detached and

estranged from the commonality of folk culture and delves directly into the essence of movement and choreographic techniques. Yu Ping writes,

Sun Longkui himself says that he created *Remains of Spring* to explore issues of choreographic technique such as the contrast of spatial forms and gravity. . . . Yes, Sun Longkui is concerned with “force patterns” presented in the stage space, and he can tell you that the *Remains of Spring* is a “force pattern” dominated by falling, blocking, and stagnation. He can tell you that this “force pattern” is a reasonable variation of the inner rhythm of the soft and fluid Korean folk dance.<sup>56</sup>

In Sun Longkui’s self-description, we can see a choreographer’s growing desire to create. And this desire is expressed in his indulgence in choreographic techniques and dance aesthetics. Although Sun Longkui says that he is only exploring the choreographic techniques of space and force in his creation, he himself cannot deny that *Remains of Spring* expresses meaning beyond its physicality. Even the title *Remains of Spring* itself is full of meaning: in the remnant of spring, perhaps all the struggle and fighting cannot restore the fleeting beautiful spring. Yet, hope never dies, and while sinking into vice, it is still waiting for spring’s rebirth. Regardless of whether such connotation comes first, guiding Sun Longkui’s exploration of space and force, or is secondary, arising naturally from space and “force patterns,” it shows that the meanings expressed in the choreography have the potential to combine with the inner qualities of Korean folk dance. Even if the national folk dance materials are treated purely as patterns of space and force, as long as they are not dismantled, the traditional patterns and connotations of national folk dance have significant value for selection. This value is that it matches the creative needs of the choreographer. Then this value for selection can preserve some part of the cultural meaning. In the case of *Remains of Spring*, the continuous and pliable Gutgeori rhythm of Korean dance has a strong inner strength, and the clanging staccato of the Andan rhythm has a sudden burst of power, constituting an element that meets the choreographer’s creative needs. Using a “model of force” dominated by falling, blocking, and stagnation to express the inner power of the mind also conveys the internal power of traditional Korean culture. In a work such as *Remains of Spring*, the broad and concrete folk culture is further condensed and abstracted, provoking a sense of vitality. The clear and straightforward folk culture has been transformed into a secret cultural symbol, which is

more and more hidden and unseen. It should be noted that Sun Longkui has not only elevated Korean male dance to a new level but also revolutionized the Korean dance vocabulary. What is important is that he used traditional national folk dance as an object of experimentation for his choreographic techniques, yet he was able to use his own deep understanding of Korean national character and accurate grasp of dance rhythms and thus did not stray from the distinctive characteristics of Korean dance.

In the development of Chinese national folk dance since then, I believe that Korean dance creation can almost become a unique and typical phenomenon, that is, a great extension of forms supported by a cultural core that emphasizes an inward rather than outward orientation. The rhythm, breath, and emotion inherent in Korean folk dance provide a deep core that remains highly recognizable even when the form is extended and changed. This is reminiscent of Korean dance master Choe Seung-hui's pioneering explorations when she created the contemporary dance education system, which is based on Korean dance and seems to prefigure the openness of Korean dance.

Nevertheless, Sun Longkui's statement still alerts us somewhat to a tendency of national folk dance creation toward choreographic techniques. In particular, this concept of space and force, which exists in choreographic technique, has a strong Western modern dance dimension. The choreography technique taught at the Beijing Dance Academy's Department of Choreography was itself built on the basis of Western choreographic theory. However, at the time, the danger of the influence of choreographic techniques on the creation of national folk dance was not obvious. This is because Sun Longkui, who is ethnically Korean, had not yet shaken the subjectivity of traditional Korean folk dances in *Remains of Spring*, and the "variation" of its inner rhythm was within a "reasonable" range. The problem is, How should one define this reasonable range? When variation itself becomes reasonable, the degree of variation becomes an empty concept that is very difficult to control.

In these works, the choreographers began to grasp the spirit of national folk dance with a higher vision. Based on the pursuit of resemblance, their use of forms and changes became more unhindered and ordered. From this, we can see the trend of so-called academy-style (*xueyuan pai* 学院派) choreography. Once professional dance education in New China became considerably developed, a creative energy derived from teaching began to emerge and gradually gained prominence. In the creation of *Gallop* and *Remains of*

*Spring*, we can even see the difference between the two folk dance teaching systems. The Beijing Dance Academy's "element-based teaching method" (*yuansu jiaoxuefa* 元素教学法) for national folk dance has deconstructed the folk dance to the elemental level, and the teaching is more standardized and has more value for physical training. On the other hand, the Minzu University Dance Department's "combination teaching method" (*zuhe jiaoxuefa* 组合教学法) for national folk dance retains more of the original characteristics of folk dance culture. Therefore, *Gallop*, although it also fits the content of the times, has more of a "self-directed" quality of folk dance. In contrast, *Remains of Spring* has a stronger artistic quality with higher refinement of movements and ideas, and at the level of exploration of choreographic techniques it also has deeper awareness of structure.<sup>57</sup>

The trend toward academy-style choreography actually emerged following the movement of ideological liberation in the 1980s. At the beginning of China's reform and opening up, the influx of theories and doctrines from the West accelerated reflection on Chinese literature and art in intellectual circles following the Cultural Revolution. Although many of the discussions at that time were rushed and rudimentary and there were a lot of misinterpretations, people at that time were more confident, more open, and self-reflective. Therefore, the academy system, which was becoming more and more mature in terms of training and theory, began to gradually become the leading force in national folk dance choreography. Additionally, more people began to join the theoretical debate on the development of national folk dance. In the mid-1980s, the topic of national folk dance was one of the central topics in Chinese dance. Of course, this topic could never be separated from the proposition of tradition and modernity, conservatism and innovation. Generally speaking, people's arguments were almost unanimous, that is, to encourage innovation on the foundation of maintaining tradition and to try to strike a balance between this dichotomy. In 1987, China's *Dance* magazine also initiated a discussion on the development of national folk dance. Wu Xiaobang's summary of this discussion is somewhat representative:

The new folk dance artists said goodbye to the old ideas and customs of the feudal society. Of course, there will be people who at first feel an emptiness and bewilderment in the new social change. This is because the old habits are abandoned in the process of change. The new ideals, culture and morality, are not yet firmly established, and there is no set of new dance forms to replace the old habits. Therefore, some people for



a time may have a nostalgic feeling of attachment and love for the old, and some people want to replace the old form completely with the art of capitalist countries. Both are not feasible. . . . The folk dance that we advocate today is the inheritance and development of the old folk dance that has a long history and tradition. It is the responsibility of every dance artist to transform the old forms and give new life to folk dance.<sup>58</sup>

In Wu Xiaobang's words, we see the reality that national folk dance is facing two fronts at the same time: the historical fragmentation and the impact of Western culture. So, it can only move forward in a compromising balance. In this process, the fulcrum of balance will float and sway between the two poles.

### 2.1.5. National Feeling and Country Flavor in the Root-Seeking Consciousness

In the late 1980s, a wild and unrestrained "Yellow Earth Style" (*Huangtu feng* 黄土风) began to emerge in China, sweeping through many fields including music, literature, film, and television, creating a spiritual totem like the backbone of the nation. In such a "cultural phenomenon," the Yellow Earth Style in the field of dance is not an isolated dance occurrence; in it, national folk dance choreography played an unyielding central role.

In 1987, the Shanxi Provincial Song and Dance Theatre presented *Love of the Children of the Yellow River* (*Huanghe ernü qing* 黄河儿女情). It selected nearly thirty folk songs and created twelve wonderful dances based on them, forming an epic large-scale song and dance gala with three main parts: "labor, love and joy." The gala was created collectively by a number of choreographers, and many of the works used fresh folk dances to evoke a long-lost country flavor. Fan Zhijun 樊志君 wrote, "It sings folk songs, and the twelve dances have all traces of folk art. However, it is a clever blend of modern dance, disco, jazz, and even breakdancing rhythms, resulting in new dance rhythms that are difficult to depict in words."<sup>59</sup> This new rhythm that is difficult to describe in words presented a strange combination of tradition and modernity, and to a considerable extent it epitomized the situation of Chinese society at that time, in which East and West were mixed together. In the reform and opening up of China, an instant influx of culture flooded our space. Before we had time to react, the simple traditional dance culture

was directly confronted with the bizarre and fantastic modern dance culture. The combination of the two crossed not only geographical space but also the time of social development. The two dance cultures with such a huge contrast in time and space were combined without time for adjustment and fusion. While bringing amazement to the senses, it also reflected an aspect of cultural collision. However, we can see in *Love of the Children of the Yellow River* that although the creators' eyes and minds were set on faraway places, their feet were firmly planted on the traditional ground. The novelty of foreign dance culture was not the focus of their creation, and the borrowing of modern popular dance was only superficial, just like adding a little spice. The real fulcrum of creation lay in the return and reappearance of traditional Yellow Earth culture. This return and reappearance in the chaotic cultural environment faced by the opening of China had a strong impact. It reflected that the cultural and artistic creators did not want to be lost but had a conscious desire to discover their own mother culture. For this reason Yu Ping sees it as a second shockwave of the dance scene in the new era: "In the dance scene of the new era, the first shockwave was the dance drama *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road*, which initiated the bringing to life of a static historical language of traditional dance; the second shockwave, the folk song and dance gala *Love of the Children of the Yellow River*, triggered the promotion of the life force underlying traditional dance."<sup>60</sup>

The shockwave sparked by *Love of the Children of the Yellow River* quickly spread. In the early 1990s, the Beijing Dance Academy launched two successive folk dance galas: *Country Dance and Country Love* (*Xiang wu xiang qing* 乡舞乡情) and *Dedicated to My Father and Mother* (*Xiangei an dieniang* 献给俺爹娘). With these, the academy-style national folk dance creation reached a peak and also pushed the themes of "nation" (*minzu* 民族) and "native soil" (*xiangtu* 乡土) to an extreme. Compared to the "new dance rhythms that are difficult to depict in words" that emerged from combining Western and folk dances, the dance in these two galas was more pure and possessed more of the attracting force of traditional culture. Zhang Jigang 张继钢 and his works were undoubtedly the most eye-catching and became a phenomenon with paradigmatic significance.

*I Come from the Yellow River* (*An cong Huanghe lai* 俺从黄河来) portrays a group of people from the Yellow River, and among their dance dynamics, the gait from the Han folk dance form *guzi yangge* 鼓子秧歌 left a deep impression. Through the steady and solid stride, we can see the forward-moving steps of the Chinese people, who carry a deep tradition,



Fig. 21. *Love of the Children of the Yellow River*, 1990. Shanxi Provincial Song and Dance Theater. Photographer: Ye Jin.

moving between history and contemporary reality. In a very representative way, this proves the exemplary nature of “academy-style” folk dance. The movement style and aesthetic qualities of “stability, composure, stretching, and toughness” refined from *guzi yangge* show the exemplary significance of the sublimation of folk dance traditions. As a folk dance of Shandong Province, this aesthetic quality corresponds to the culture of the Yellow River basin, especially the spirit of Qilu 齐鲁 culture. By exaggerating the aesthetic qualities of *guzi yangge*, this spirit is also highlighted. The rhythmic style and special characteristics refined by academy-style national folk dance with Chinese aesthetics have become the cornerstone of choreography for a generation of Yellow River-style dance. This represents the higher level of cultural pursuits in “broad folk dance.”

*I Come from the Yellow River* also demonstrated a strong root-seeking consciousness at a turning point in the accelerating process of modern Chinese society. The name of the dance itself recalls the old and familiar philosophical proposition: “Who are you? Where do you come from? And where are you going?” The sense of belonging to one’s own culture is very strong. In the work, the dancers, with their unique gait, stride solidly, step by step, and



Fig. 22. *I Come from the Yellow River*, 1991. Performed by Beijing Dance Academy. Photographer: Ye Jin.

seem to come from the mist of the source of the Yellow River. The man lifts the woman up as high as a mountain, and the woman holds a dignified pose, with strength amid softness. They fearlessly press forward, gather together in various deep gestures, condense into a strong group sculpture: These are our forebears in our eyes, those who pioneered under burdens, endured in perseverance, and cried out in silence. It's as if we subtly expect the composure of our ancestors to resolve the confusion of today. *I Come from the Yellow River* may be able to answer the question "Where do you come from?" but it cannot necessarily answer "Where are you going?" Our eyes can see through the fog of history but not necessarily through the disturbance of contemporary reality. We can draw some spiritual strength from the return of tradition, but we will not necessarily find the magic solution to today's dilemma. This seems to be a metaphor for the conundrum of national folk dance choreography. When the future direction falls into strife and trouble, the traditional mother of civilization offers a tranquil, comforting, and enriching embrace. Yet, we can't rest in it forever. Perhaps we come from the Yellow River, but do we need to leave the Yellow River? Will we perhaps again return to the Yellow River, to the place where our dreams began? Both the answer to "Where do we come from?" and the question of "Where do we go?" are no longer quotidian activities of the folk. They are cultural propositions overlooking the entire nation that seem to have a strong sense of cultural predestination.



Fig. 23. *Yellow Earth Yellow*, 1990. Performed by Beijing Dance Academy. Photographer: Ye Jin.

The 1990 production *Yellow Earth Yellow* (*Huangtu huang* 黄土黄) turns from the origin of the Yellow River civilization to the land on the banks of the Yellow River that gave birth to and raised us. It too has a kind of moving and shocking power. *Chinese Dance*, edited by Zi Huayun, offers the following description:

A group of bare-breasted men carrying drums, and a group of women wearing slanting lapel cloth coats and narrow-legged pants remind people of the folks who have been guarding this Yellow Earth for generations—they seem to have just climbed up out from the “clods of dirt.” But when the men and women take turns to dance, beating the drums on their backs loudly enough to arouse the heavens, stamping their feet, kicking their legs, almost stamping pits into the earth . . . you will feel that they have already stepped into the modern society. Using a form “of the earth” that could not be more “earthy,” they vent their long-held feelings in a very “modern” way. This true love for the Yellow Earth beneath our feet, longing for the world beyond the mountains, and the hope for the future . . . burst out through the endless, repetitive beating of the drums. The extraordinary magnitude and intensity of the movements and the repetition of unison choreography is rare in previous dances, and the drummer who enters a state of “madness” causes the earth to shake.<sup>61</sup>

*Yellow Earth Yellow* really developed the cultural significance of “Yellow Earth culture” to its extreme. People whose ancestors lived on the Yellow Earth felt the temptation of the outside world and the assault of modern society, and amid an almost infatuated rejoicing, they continue to complete the spiritual ritual of perseverance. In *Yellow Earth Yellow*, Zhang Jigang created an important characteristic, namely, the simple power of the movements and the repeating shift from weak to strong. The movement material in *Yellow Earth Yellow* is relatively simple, without too many fancy changes and techniques. Mainly, it extracts several typical forms of *yangge* drum dance from the Yellow Earth Plateau. This has a simple power in its uncomplicated striking and straightforward dynamics. Then Zhang Jigang continuously repeats this form in different ways, in shifting formations, in the changes of direction, and in alternating weakness and strength. In many cases, the repetitive movements going from weak to strong accumulate a kind of power, and the amplitude and strength of the movements continue to increase to a critical point of explosion. The overall structure of the work is a repetition of this accumulation process, and when the accumulation process from weakness to strength approaches its strongest point, it is quickly released and transformed into a new accumulation process. The most explosive release point is the moment when all the male actors collectively kneel down. The Chinese peasants’ reverent worship of the land takes on a soul-shaking power in this kneeling. In my opinion, this treatment itself strongly corresponds to the traditional way of life of the loess. People have been clinging to a piece of loess for generations, whether it is rich and fertile or poor and barren, day after day, year after year, never giving up. Is this not also a simple repetition, a cycle of accumulating strength in repetition? At the end, the stage lights, after several shifts of light and dark, gradually turn from light to dark, and a vast yellow land slowly rises from the sky. The drum dance still continues relentlessly, accompanying the dancing figures who are almost hoarse from shouting and almost exhausted from beating. What really lasts in the passage of time is the piece of land in the people’s hearts. The exchange of day and night and the cycle of the years cannot stop the heaven-shaking sound of the drums and shouts. The lead dancer’s performance is a more graphic interpretation of this emotion: he trembles, moved as if about to cry. He desperately grabs the loess, holds it to his heart, and raises it to the sky. At this point, it seems that in the loess sprinkling through his fingers, one can feel the blood and sweat of the ancestors in every pore of one’s body.

Yu Ping writes, “It’s clear that when Zhang Jigang was a young choreographer dedicating ‘the art of youth—dance’ to the village elders, his main

goal was not to arouse his heart's youthful vitality, but to give it satisfaction in yearning for the past."<sup>62</sup> *Yellow Earth Yellow* uses the most direct manner of national folk dance to explain the deep-rooted emotional connection to the land in farming culture. As the core element of farming culture, land is the fundamental thing that sustains life. It has also become firmly entrenched in people's thoughts. But in the modern transformation of Chinese society, cultural concepts are caught in a deep contradiction of reality. On the one hand, people use the word "earthy" (*tu* 土) to disparagingly describe poverty and backwardness, while on the other hand, they cannot get rid of the deep-rooted sense of land. This consciousness seems to represent the original call of farming culture and a certain connection with history. However, in the midst of drastic social changes, the ultimate values of farming culture have lost their historical coordinates and scales, and people today have lost their relationship with history and the land. The panic that comes from this breakdown needs to be supported by spiritual strength. In the absence of a new spiritual power, the glorification of and attachment to traditional spiritual strength becomes an option. Zhang Hua 张华 explains, "Spiritual 'uprootedness' is the cultural destiny of contemporary Chinese people, and Zhang Jigang consigns himself to this destiny without exception."<sup>63</sup> But this return to the spiritual power of tradition also brought deeper reflections. In an essay on the interpretation of *Yellow Earth Yellow*, Wu Zilian 吴子连 writes:

The people of the Yellow Earth are perhaps too attached to the land and their home, such that it is difficult to start looking for a more fertile land on the other side of the mountains around their home. The lure of oases and plains is like the clear sound of a horn in the morning breeze that attracts the amazement and longing of the yellow land. But what follows is not the light footsteps of travel. . . . Returning to one's roots and sticking to the fields is the mentality of the old man who is no longer capable of trekking to find new areas. It is eating away at a nation's vigor for the future.<sup>64</sup>

The earth in *Yellow Earth Yellow* is no longer a real concept of land but a reflection on the land, on the roots of China's Central Plains civilization. The adherence to the land is a solid spiritual force that supports the traditional structure of Chinese society, but Wu Zilian's essay seems to foreshadow the impending ruthless abandonment of it. In the reform and open-

ing up of China, both the social structure and the way of life are facing drastic changes. The contemporary humanistic spirit, which lacks historical backing, is overwhelmed in its hastiness. So, the entrenched traditional spirit has no choice but to absorb more open-minded wisdom to enrich its monotony. This is reminiscent of the Chinese television series *River Elegy*, which was a sensation and caused great controversy at the same time. The Yellow River, which gave birth to Chinese civilization, flows through the Loess Plateau and into the sea. This inspired radical cultural scholars of the time to see the transition from a relatively conservative culture of the land to a relatively open culture of the sea. This was, in fact, a reflection on the historical process and future direction of China, and it also triggered a fierce collision between liberalism and traditional society. Like the Yellow Earth Style in other fields of literature and art, *Yellow Earth Yellow* not only subconsciously aimed to explore the cultural mother tongue of artistic creation but also intended to transcend the cultural contradictions of the present in the process of this exploration. In the midst of spiritual uncertainty and conceptual conflict, *Yellow Earth Yellow* became an earnest backward glance in the modernization process of Chinese national folk dance. Ultimately, what it left was a sublime shadow of the back-turned body.

Nevertheless, we can still see that the shocking power of *Yellow Earth Yellow* comes from the most fundamental cultural connotations of the national folk dance, which is derived from farming culture. Zhang Jigang's creation that directly cuts to the root also presents a naked essential power. This surely demonstrates that the traditional cultural meaning of national folk dances is still the most moving part of his choreography, the soul of his creation. At the end of the work, the drumming and dancing figures on the vast land show unprecedented power. Although *Yellow Earth Yellow* is separated from the present reality, its wildness, explosiveness, shouting, and fearlessness coalesce into a national totem that arouses a sense of primeval courage and uprightness. It is no coincidence that in the film *Yellow Earth*, there is also a grand scene of the canonical Ansai waist drum. The drum team that slowly rises from below the horizon, the figures dancing against the dusty sky, also constitutes a powerful image of drumming in the Yellow Earth. This image almost constituted a core emblem of the nation in contemporary China.

Compared with the two aforementioned works, *A Twisting Yangge Performer* (*Yi ge niu yangge de ren* 一个扭秧歌的人) shifts from describing a group of people to portraying a typical individual image, portraying the life





Fig. 24. *A Twisting Yangge Performer*, 1991. Choreographer: Zhang Jigang. Photographer: Ye Jin.

journey and artistic dreams of a folk *yangge* artist with moving brush strokes. In the dance, we see two unusual life views. One is the life of the human body, the aging of which deprives the body of the ability to dance and ends the life of the dancing body. The other is the immortal life of the dance itself, which is passed on in different living physical bodies and inspires people's spiritual world. So it is precisely when the sad sound of music announces the decline of the physical life that it can inspire a stronger love for dance. A guide to Chinese dance appreciation states, "The amazing thing is that the decrepit old man could find 'a new lease on life' in the music. His eyebrows trembled, his shoulders and chest twisted, and his head and body swayed. For a moment, he actually jumped up, hands dancing with red silks, feet on the ground, just like the spirit come to 'life.' When the music rose up, he suddenly fell to the ground and was silent."<sup>65</sup> In this transition between "life" and "death," we see an intense contrast. Using the limited life to protect

and pass on national folk dance, allowing it to attain a limitless eternal life, traditional dance in this moment possesses a force that profoundly moves people's hearts.

Accordingly, the work's bright transitions of color and atmosphere, as well as the rise and fall of strength and weakness of the dance movements, form a rhythm and contrast that touch the heart. A spotlight illuminates an old folk artist seated cross-legged on the stage murmuring as a group of students watch curiously; the old performer's movements become larger, until he rises and dances, and the students flock to him in surprise and excitement; the old artist dances with red silks, expressing freely as if reborn, and the students are infected and also recklessly dance with the red silk; the old folk artist falls back to the ground, his movements become weak, and the students gaze at him with emotion. Sometimes heart-breaking sadness, sometimes uncontrollable passion poured out, the reality and the illusion of the spiritual world become intertwined and indistinguishable. Whether it is "imaginary" or "real," the combination of "*yangge*" and "person" created a hymn of life. For this reason, in *A Twisting Yangge Performer*, the large dance and beautiful movements of the body are not the point of the work. They only reflect the retrospection of memories and the persistence of spirit. From beginning to end, I believe that the most touching scene is actually not when the old folk artist leads the youth to burst forth in excitement, dancing the red scarves, but instead when the old man sits on the floor, slightly moving his body, using a subtle rhythm to interpret the entire meaning of *yangge*. The whimpering erhu music is like a voice floating from the depths of memory. The nimble movements of the rice sprout song are written on the old man's intoxicated face and left in the depths of his heart. In this moment, *yangge* is no longer just a world of movement of dance but a rich spiritual world. The aging body hinders the continuation of the movement, but it cannot hinder perception of the culture of life. The guide goes on,

The reincarnation of time is always so merciless, and the empty silence is filled with the inexplicable melancholy of the erhu that tears people's hearts, forcing the old man to leave the only dream of his life. But even so, the old man still achieved the nirvana of "death." In his extremely weak world of movement, what is forged is still the purity of the *yangge*. He used his physical body to highlight the character of farming people, in exchange for the "immortality" of life.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike the profoundness of *I Come from the Yellow River* and the exuberance of *Yellow Earth Yellow*, the tragedy of *A Twisting Yangge Performer* is more intense. Zhang Jigang's most persistent and profound interpretation of a folk artist's life provides an external perspective on national folk dance folk artists in the modern environment, and it also makes us realize more profoundly that the real carrier of national folk dance survival is undoubtedly the people themselves. Only in the body of the inheritor can there be such a living art that is integrated with life, continuing like breath and flowing like blood. For those young people clustered around the old folk artist, it is difficult to really understand the inner world of the old man's art, because it is not a world of imagination but a journey experienced with life. Only when their lives are invested in it will they truly understand its flavor. Zhang Jigang's grasp of this subject matter is not a simple development and creation of national folk dance but a profound care for national folk dance itself with deep emotion, full of humanistic concern. The end of the old man's artistic life is a sad curtain call. That most honest and simple artistic temperament of his body will hopelessly fade away in the filth and noise of modernization, and it will be difficult for it to reappear. As if an elegy, the dance foretells the tragedy of traditional national folk dance in modern China. Yet, the delayed music seems to indicate a lingering hope.

While being moved by this return, the "Yellow River and Yellow Earth culture" that carries a strong national sentiment and breath of the countryside allows us to deeply intuit the spiritual force that firmly supports China's thousands of years of civilization. When this kind of culture is thrown toward the rapidly advancing whirlpool of China's modern society, it takes on a tragic atmosphere that is difficult to escape. However, for a long period of time until now, it is this "attachment to the countryside" for traditional culture that has greatly supported the dignity of national folk dance and prevented traditional culture's total decline. Zhang Jigang once said that his choreographic concept is "rice" (subject matter), which when put onstage should be "wine." This is a very graphic analogy, since from "rice" to "wine" is a process of qualitative change. "Rice" is a kind of culture, while "wine" is a kind of art. The mellow aroma of the "wine" cannot be separated from the thick substance of "rice." In all aspects, Zhang Jigang's creations have pushed the academic folk dance creation to a peak. This is especially true in the humanistic value of Han folk dance culture expressed in his works, which are outstanding in their depth of thinking and height of perspective. It is important to note that this return to the local culture of the countryside is mainly based on Han culture, which has greatly improved the level of

Han folk dance creation. Previously, Han folk dances were weaker in terms of cultural richness and diversity of forms compared with those of ethnic minorities. However, the Central Plains culture with the Han as its subject has a strong capacity for integration, so it can be more proactive in cultural reflection and self-evolution.

In addition, we should also note that with the active creation of national folk dance in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the trend of diversification became more and more obvious, so much so that it began to cause problems in the classification of the genres of folk dance creation. In March 1992, a national seminar on Chinese dance creation was held in Kunming, where an attempt was made to reach a consensus on the different types of national folk dance choreography. Finally, as explained by Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, folk dance choreography was divided into three categories:

One type is the mass kind of national folk dance that occurs and develops within social life. Some of these are self-entertaining in the folk, and some are performed by the public in the public square. One type is the organized and reworked kind of national folk dance performed on the stage. Among these, some keep the original form more and some are more processed. Another type is the creative kind, which uses national folk dance as the basic element for creation to enhance the artistic expression of choreography.<sup>67</sup>

The conference ultimately emphasized that it doesn't exclude the existence of other categories and practices of national folk dance creation. These coexist side by side and have their own characteristics, each with their own different social functions and aesthetic values. So, there should be no distinction between high and low categories, and one category should not be used to exclude another. The discussion of the categories of folk dance choreography reflects, to some extent, the increasingly diversified development of choreography, as well as turmoil over the degree of creation of works. This threw the issue of categories of national folk dance choreography into a situation that grew increasingly awkward and complicated.

#### 2.1.6. Sublimation and Transformation of Forms

Regarding the diversification in the development of Chinese national folk dance choreography, a typical example is that while the "Zhang Jigangs" were



Fig. 25. *Spirit of the Peacock*, 1986. Performed by Yang Liping of Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Ye Jin.

sinking far into the deep soil of traditional culture, others were drifting up to a freer artistic space. Different from the “attachment to the countryside” of seeking and reflecting on traditional culture, national folk dance choreography showed another tendency of pursuing a highly artistic sense of form.

It is interesting to note that the peacock dance was again the subject of a major breakthrough in the innovation of folk dance. *Spirit of the Peacock* (*Que zhi ling* 雀之灵), which appeared in 1986, broke through the traditional scope of national folk dance creation with a qualitative change. Yet, it used the spiritual light from folk culture to illuminate national folk dance choreography onstage. The nearly transparent white gauze skirt trailing the moving curves, the strange and agile arms reflecting wings swirling in the water, and the peacock standing with the flick of a finger—the peacock image surviving in Yang Liping’s 杨丽萍 body has completely cast off its folk earthy atmosphere and religious meaning and become a contemporary form with a beautiful bearing. Wang and Long write,

From the poetic movement of her arms, her fluttering flight and steady circling, we see both a beautiful dancing peacock and a Dai girl (or the dancer herself) expressing her firm pursuit of a beautiful ideal world. It is because this dance fully expresses the dance creator's subjective consciousness and spirit of originality that it creates such a unique, beautiful, and clever dance image with distinctive individual characteristics.<sup>68</sup>

As described in this passage, what we see in *Spirit of the Peacock* is a "subjective consciousness" and "spirit of originality," and the anthropomorphic peacock and the Dai girl are in fact both "the dancer herself." We may even ask whether *Spirit of the Peacock* can be defined as national folk dance in the strict sense. It does not "inherit" much of the traditional Dai folk dance but more or less simply borrows a conceptual image of the peacock from Dai culture. Yang Liping has worked with this image to fully develop her own bodily abilities. She has created her own dance vocabulary, especially the wavy movements of her arms and the exaggerated curvature of her body that has become her signature dance form. However, in terms of the logic of movement inheritance, this form does not have a strong historical connection with the traditional folk dance culture. Rather, the distance between the new and beautiful form and the historical tradition created a new object of admiration in folk dance culture. Yu Ping writes,

That hand shape with the thumb and forefinger gently pinched together, with the middle finger to the little finger slender and fanned out, has become Yang Liping's code; public interest seems to have rebuilt its devotion to "serious dance" through its worship of this hand shape. The "Yang Liping" phenomenon in the dance world has undoubtedly brought some light to the not so prosperous "serious dance."<sup>69</sup>

If we compare the 1980s work *Spirit of the Peacock* with Jin Ming's *Peacock Dance* from the 1950s, we will find that both of them have made significant innovations to the "peacock dance" of traditional folk dance and attracted a great deal of attention. However, unlike the controversy over *Peacock Dance* in the 1950s, *Spirit of the Peacock* did not spark a "peacock dance controversy." People showed a wide acceptance of such a highly innovative dance. The reason for this is that the openness of Chinese society in the mid-1980s was far greater than that of the 1950s, and this openness allowed *Spirit of the Peacock*

to establish a contemporary model of folk dance for the stage in a purely aesthetic form that did not carry too much content. When people were amazed by Yang Liping's water-like arms and fascinated by the strong twisting of her body, it actually meant that the "peacock dance," as a representative national folk dance, had truly accomplished a complete transformation from the land of the folk to the art stage. The popularity of *Spirit of the Peacock* does not lie in deep traditional culture, which is only a few wisps of scent in the dance and almost dissipated. The real point is that *Spirit of the Peacock* uses the female dancing body as the central role, creating a beautiful sense of form and artistic poise, satisfying people's natural preference for formal beauty. In a male-dominated society, the aesthetic tradition of representing women in dance is in fact a common phenomenon and a remnant of historical development. In the process of transforming the traditional cultural connotations in national folk dances, such as religious rituals, from functional to aesthetic, some of them have naturally shifted to female-centered music and dance for appreciation. The transformation of ancient Chinese witch dances into female music and the transformation of traditional dances in the Arab world from fertility-related religious worship to seductive oriental dances are examples of this. The innovation of gender and dance forms in *Peacock Dance* in the 1950s was in fact also a major transformation toward artistic aesthetics, except that this step then gave rise to controversies about formal beauty and the destruction of traditional customs. Yang Liping's *Spirit of the Peacock* is a further aesthetic transformation in a more open modern society. When Yang Liping danced elegantly onstage with her female body, the connotation of traditional folk culture became weakened and the purely aesthetic meaning was strengthened. What is remarkable about *Spirit of the Peacock* is that this aesthetic transformation does not fall into vulgarity. Borrowing the holy aura of the peacock in the traditional Dai culture, Yang Liping deifies the peacock again, transforming it into a beautiful and elegant female figure, which makes people appreciate it with admiration and devotion. The image of the peacock, holding a white feathered dress in one hand and a finger high above her head with the other, is fixed in people's eyes and has become an extraordinary and refined symbol of contemporary female beauty.

Yang Liping's iconic dance form of arms and body has since appeared in many of her subsequent works. For example, in *Moonlight* (*Yueguang* 月光) and *Two Trees* (*Liang ke shu* 两棵树), the scenes and imagery are constantly changing, but the main dance forms continue. In the TV series

*Legend of the Condor Heroes* (*She diao yingxiong zhuan* 射雕英雄传), Yang Liping's supple arms and long pointed fingers are even transformed into Mei Chaofeng's body, creating a poignant and unmatched image of "Nine Yin Skeleton Claw" and a tragic woman. Having such a simple dance form be so frequently reproduced and widely disseminated among so many dance works is very rare in national folk dance choreography. Compared with most professional choreographers in the dance scene, Yang Liping is a special case, whose influence and recognition have gone beyond the control of the professional "dance circle." The unique folk dance form she created for the stage not only is quite exemplary but has also undergone multiple evolutions in contemporary society. Thus, what we see is that Yang Liping and her dance forms are almost worshipped by the general public, becoming a kind of "Yang Liping phenomenon." When we interpret this phenomenon from the perspective of folk dance creation, we will face considerable confusion. On the one hand, Yang Liping's dance form itself has become a personalized symbol. This makes it difficult to define as a folk dance work in the strict sense, and it does not have universal significance in the field of national folk dance creation. On the other hand, Yang Liping's dance was born on the stage but grew up in folklore, and its influence and dissemination are fully in line with a "folk" spirit. Perhaps the latter can better explain the essence of the "Yang Liping phenomenon."

Unlike Yang Liping's personal sense of artistic form, along with the influence of Western modern dance from the 1980s there emerged a new development in the pursuit of artistic form in national folk dance choreography. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, China began to implement the national policy of reform and opening up. As soon as the closed door of the country was opened, people showed a strong thirst for understanding the outside world. Jin Ming, who had borrowed foreign art forms and made a breakthrough in the creation of peacock dance in the 1950s, clearly expressed this concern in an article as early as 1979. He wrote,

On the one hand, we are rooted in the foundation of national folk song and dance art, and at the same time, we must have an understanding of the current situation of the contemporary international cultural scene—What is the current situation of the development of the international modern school of dance? What is the "new wave" in contemporary art? What is "modern ballet"? And so on, how are they formed and developed? What is the reaction of the people to it in various countries? I



think these things are necessary to stimulate our creative thinking, broaden our horizons, and break the trend of creation toward generalities and abstractions.<sup>70</sup>

This was the mentality of many Chinese choreographers at that time and for a long time afterward. People were already aware of the problems of generalization and conceptualization in creation, and the roots of national folk dance art needed to be nourished by more artistic nutrients. Unlike the Soviet dance art that had previously influenced the Chinese dance community on an ideological level, the opening of China's doors at this time meant that the whole of Western culture and art gained influence. Even some art forms and ideas that we had previously perceived as corrupt and wrong entered China at a speed that we had not anticipated. Of course, China's earlier history was not without its exposure to Western dance art. Wu Xiaobang, Dai Ailian, Jia Zuoguang, and other dance pioneers were all trained in Western modern dance. However, the influence of modern dance at that time was basically limited to European modern dance, especially the influence of the German school of modern dance, and it was spread to a large extent through Japan. Wu Xiaobang went to Japan three times from 1929 to 1936 to study with the dancers Masao Takada and Takaya Eguchi and their wives, and he studied the dance theories of modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman during his studies. During her dance studies in London, Dai Ailian studied with Rudolf Laban, a pioneer of modern dance in Germany, and later with Mary Wigman, a student of Laban and a master of modern dance.<sup>71</sup> At the age of fifteen, Jia Zuoguang was enrolled in the juvenile dance class of the Manchurian Cinema Association (the predecessor of Changchun Film Studio), where he was taught personally by Japanese modern dance master Ishii Baku and received rigorous physical training in ballet and modern dance. It can be seen that the modern dance influences of these three representative Chinese dance artists were mainly German Expressionist modern dance. At that time, China had less exposure to American modern dance, which was certainly a matter of historical chance and choice but also quite consistent with the overall social conditions of China at that time. During the long period of war and turmoil, people were suffering too much and suppressing too many emotions. For them, expressionist dance with strong emotional catharsis and introspective temperament seemed to be more suitable for people's desire to express their feelings. Unlike this situation, after the opening of the new era, China was

more influenced by American modern dance culture, and it has been growing since the mid-1980s. Unlike the German Expressionist dance, American modern dance has more of the versatility and creativity of modern industrial society. Under the influence of the free, open, and rapidly developing and changing American modern dance culture, the creativity of Chinese choreographers was greatly stimulated and mobilized. This has directly affected the creative presentation of Chinese national folk dance, even blurring the boundaries of its categorization. Even those works that we still largely identify as national folk dances have shown a different pursuit of artistic form.

*A Green Leaf* (*Yi pian lüye* 一片绿叶) is a representative national folk dance choreography that pursues an artistic sense of form. In fact, the folk dance creations of choreographer Gao Du 高度 are quite diversified, and the traditional culture has a heavy weight in most of his works. In Gao Du's choreography, one can often see the coexistence of national folk culture and modern art, and this is a gradual process from the former to the latter. Most of Gao's early works are still within the scope of traditional national folk dance creation, but *A Green Leaf* shows a stronger modern artistic temperament than any of his previous works, which truly reflects his unique personality and is the most representative. In the dance, Gao used a lot of Han Jiaozhou *yangge* materials. He himself said that he selected the movements that were most traditional and typical of Jiaozhou *yangge* dynamics, and he even discarded those movements that were not distinctive in style. In this way, Gao wanted to preserve the "tradition" as much as possible. However, the transitions between these traditional movements in *A Green Leaf* did not follow the traditional way at all. The newly substituted transitions make the dance movements become completely fluid, changing the rhythmic and breathing patterns that are most characteristic of the traditional folk dance style and making the traditional appearance of the Jiaozhou *yangge* almost unrecognizable. We can even imagine how the choreographer and performers spent time constantly experimenting with the movements in the classroom, causing the traditional Jiaozhou *yangge* to "flow." When the Jiaozhou *yangge* really flows like clouds and water, the tradition is deconstructed, and the pure movement material itself is no longer enough to structure the Jiaozhou *yangge* tradition in its totality. This is a work created out of immersion in the world of movement, and the imagery of *A Green Leaf* takes on an artistic sense of form in the dissolution of traditional movement. In the flow of Yanni's modern music melody, the fan in the dancer's hand flips up and down, and the body follows along like a shadow, like a green leaf fluttering



Fig. 26. *A Green Leaf*, 2000.  
Choreographer: Gao Du.

like a spirit, twirling in a pure ideascap. If we say that *Spirit of the Peacock* took up the magic of the peacock, then *A Green Leaf* took up the magic of the leaf. And, because of this bit of magic of artistic creation, national folk dance is no longer “folk.”

Unlike Yang Liping’s self-created whole of a personalized dance form, Gao Du’s transformation is created on the basis of the traditional dance form, thus “stimulating” the nerves of tradition even more. The variation of the Jiaozhou *yangge* form severed the connection with the historical tradition from the perspective of form. But also the content of the work pointed to a broad and abstract artistic direction, almost severing the relationship with the traditional folk culture. Only in the faintly discernible folk dance forms can we feel a brand-new kind of artistic expression. Yet, we have to admit that the light and swirling dance of *A Green Leaf* is vaguely compatible with the “falling lightness” and “walking floating” stylistic dynamics of Jiaozhou *yangge*. In the “flowing” Jiaozhou *yangge*, the imagery of a “green leaf” is full of vitality. Does this imply another kind of dynamism in the choreography of folk dance? Or does it imply the loss of the core traditional culture of national folk dance choreography? In the midst of the ambiguity of stylistic belonging, our evaluation of a creative work becomes hesitant,

and “tradition” as an important measure of folk dance creation begins to become ambiguous in terms of the validity and operability of such judgment. Because of this, *A Green Leaf* and similar works have aroused widespread controversy on whether they should be classified as national folk dances. But this controversy does not delay the further blurring of the lines of categorization.

From *A Green Leaf*, we can see that the academy-style national folk dance teaching has reached a very high level of exploration in movement. The higher the level of body movement training, the more the movement system itself has a kind of self-driven growth. This naturally influences the creation of national folk dance to break the limits of traditional culture and shift to the movement plane. In *A Green Leaf*, we can see even more the influence of modern dance training on the choreographer’s movement creativity and the dancers’ body movements. This shows that the movement that has freed itself from the limits of traditional cultural meanings possesses great extension and inclusiveness and also has a strong sense of form.

It is interesting to note that Gao Du’s formalized composition is like “taking a knife” to the traditional academic folk dance norms, and the imagery of *A Green Leaf* clearly has a stronger humanistic and artistic tone, thus creating a greater distance from folk dance. The work *Hunt, Stumble, Mane* (Lie—lie—lie 猎·趔·鬣), which also has a sense of movement form, was not at all controversial. The dynamic crawling movements on the ground are hard to find in a specific national folk dance, but the traces of primitive life seem to be imprinted in any folk dance. In fact, many of the movements designed in *Hunt, Stumble, Mane* are imaginative, with agile tumbling, alert prostration, body twisting, and undulating, all full of the choreographer’s creativity. However, the content of the work returns to the original state of folklore, and in the simulation of primitive scenes and dynamics, no matter how innovative the movement form is, its form and connotation are all pointing to the mysterious and ancient. For such a dance that traces its “tradition” back to primitive jungles, the “tradition” we often use as a reference loses its meaning, because it is impossible to find a more original tradition to prove it. We have also lost our customary criteria of dance categorizations. In the chaotic primitive dance culture, where do categorizations come from? It is the same change and creation of forms. However, the scale we accommodate is quite different for imagery that points to the primitive than imagery that points to the spiritual.



Fig. 27. *Hunt, Stumble, Mane*, 2000. Choreographer: Ding Wei.

### 2.1.7. Elevating Grand Themes and Approaching the Joy of Life

Xian Xinghai's 冼星海 masterpiece *Yellow River* piano concerto has always been a favorite music for dance creators. The delicate and moving sentiment and majestic momentum can provide strong emotional impulses and support for the dance, but it also poses a challenge for the choreographer's ability to master the music. The grand national theme of the *Yellow River* is an excellent entrance to interpret the spirit of Chinese national culture. It is obvious that this is not a folk style music but rather a sublimation of the national spirit after artistic refinement. This grand theme obviously hugely transcends the national folk dance that originates from the folk level. Because folk dance is essentially a dance of life and of self-sufficiency, its aesthetic taste stays at the level of folk life and does not have a higher national sentiment. The theme conveyed by the music *Yellow River* has gone beyond this kind of everyday to take a broad view on life itself. It is full of sincere emotion and concern for the nation. In fact, among the dance works created using this music, art dance forms traditionally regarded as "elite" such as Chinese classical dance and ballet were also in the forefront. National folk dance choreography in the traditional sense, though it has already to a large extent gone beyond the level of folk life, whether in its scenes or its characters, has focused in on showing the strong cultural characteristics of a certain region or nationality. It is quite challenging for folk dance choreography to grasp

such a musical theme of the overall cultural spirit of the Chinese nation. In other words, to compose national folk dance to the music of *Yellow River* is not to show the individual folk cultural characteristics of a certain region or nationality but to extract from that individuality the shared spirit of the Chinese nation.

To express the Han nationality cultural theme of the Yellow River and the spirit of the Chinese nation, the work *East Is Red* (*Dongfang hong* 东方红) naturally chose Han folk dances as its material. It also chose Shandong *yangge*, which is based on the culture of Qilu in the Yellow River basin. To break away from the folk style display and achieve the purpose of sublimating the national spirit, the work does not stick to the restrictions of the original folk dance material but boldly handles and recombines the material movements. From the stylistic point of view of the dance movements, it accurately captures the bold and majestic momentum and toughness of Shandong *guzi yangge*, and it grasps the fast and dynamic changes and graceful rhythmic extensions of Shandong Jiaozhou *yangge*, reflecting the spirit of the children of China on the banks of the Yellow River, in a refined and subtle way. On this basis, the work also accords with the characteristics of the music itself, in a “symphonic” way, weaving together solo dances, duo dances, trio dances, quartet dances, and group dances in an organic way, so that the entire choreography and the grand symphonic style of the music are well integrated together. It forms a seamless structure with the ups and downs of the intonation, thus having a kind of emotional power that moves the heart. Of course, this emotional power comes more from the epic background of the struggle of the Chinese nation presented in the work and from the cultural spirit of the Chinese nation’s roots grasped by the “divine resemblance.” This kind of spirit accords perfectly with the brave and fearless national character shown in the dance and music. Because of this, *East Is Red* largely departed from the simple folk culture atmosphere of folkloric dances and endowed national folk dance with a higher level of artistic expression. Compared with works like *I Come from the Yellow River* and *Yellow Earth Yellow* in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which are also in the “Yellow River style,” the grand theme of *East Is Red* largely dissolved the simplicity of folk culture and the sense of predestination in traditional culture, raiding the noble sense and mission of the nation and the country. A classic contrast is that both *Yellow Earth Yellow* and *East Is Red* show a group kneeling at the climax: the former’s kneeling is a strong rustic emotion surrounded by the dust in the sky, while the latter’s kneeling has an ideological image in the red silk falling



Fig. 28. *East Is Red*, 1995. Choreographers: Zhao Tiechun, Ming Wenjun. Photographer: Ye Jin.

from the sky. With the same sense of blood boiling, one is dignified and one is lofty. Both are moving, one dreamlike and one spiritual sublimation.

The two choreographers of *East Is Red* are both core members of the middle generation of the Beijing Dance Academy's academy-style national folk dance, and the creative intent it expresses is actually in line with the idea of "broad folk dance" pursued by academy-style folk dance. Its appearance was also a conscious demand for exemplary creation when the academy-style national folk dance reached a certain stage of development. Over many years of teaching, the Beijing Dance Academy systematically analyzed and refined the stylistic characteristics of folk dance movements in order to build up the "representativeness" of folk dances. The characteristics of "steady, heavy, stretching, and tough" in *guzi yangge* and "heavy lifting, light falling, and walking floating" in Jiaozhou *yangge* are actually the standardization and strengthening of style at the level of movement. This frees national folk dance from the arbitrariness and ambiguity of the movements in folk culture and forms a system of movement symbols with exemplary meaning. The connection between trivial folk connotations and movements disappears and is replaced by the "representativeness" of national culture after integration. This approach undoubtedly diluted the details of folk culture and strengthened the abstract spirit of national culture. As an academy-style national folk dance choreography that comes directly from teaching,

it is inevitable that the dance vocabulary will be influenced by this movement system and lean to a more artistic, abstract, and broad direction. This is precisely the intention of using “national” to modify “folk” in the concept of “national folk dance.”

As a trend in national folk dance creation, *East Is Red* is a typical example but not the only one. Likewise, the creation phenomenon of Beijing Dance Academy is also not the only one. The newly released Tibetan group dance *Red River Valley—Preface* (*Honghe gu—xu* 红河谷·序) by the Dance Academy of Minzu University was also a rather ambitious subject. The magnificent theme music of the film *Red River Valley* is undoubtedly not folk music. It is both an overlooking contemplation of Tibetan history and cultural traditions from a cultural height and an admiring respect for the unique cultural values of Tibetan people. In *Red River Valley—Preface*, Tibetan folk dances undergo obvious modifications in such atmospheric music. The opening and closing of movements are exaggeratedly enlarged, and the traditional style of staccato and heavy Tibetan dances is replaced by a smooth and fluent dance style. The 1980s Minzu University’s work *Gallop* is also a very powerful dance. However, both the music and the dance are imprinted with the imagery of horses drawn from the folk tradition and the expanse of the grassland culture itself. But the grand meaning of *Red River Valley—Preface* is more or less far from the original flavor of folk culture. It has the “concreteness” of a moving plot and an “abstract” emotional power. It is the transcendence of folk culture shown in such works as *Red River Valley—Preface* that raises Liu Jian’s 刘建 question about whether national folk dance choreography is suitable for grand themes. The academy-style national folk dance system has to a certain extent stripped away the folk culture connotation of the movements. This makes it easy to place the movements on a pure technical level as the material of artistic expression, and it is thus difficult to control the distance between the artistic connotation and folk culture.

Of course, compared with such grand themes, there is also folk dance choreography that goes in the opposite direction, diving headlong into the most down-to-earth folk life. *Old Companions* (*Laoban* 老伴) is a work from 2002. Among all the gorgeous national folk dance choreography in recent years, this is a work so simple that it is a bit “earthy” and so relaxed that it is a bit “nonsense.” There are no handsome men and beautiful women; the main characters of the dance are an old couple. To be true to life, the young actors do not hesitate to destroy their image by painting wrinkles on





Fig. 29. *Red River Valley—Preface*, 2005. Performed by Central Minzu University. Photographer: Ye Jin.

their faces to appear old. The man wears black-framed glasses and a white beard, and the woman even paints one of her teeth black to make a gap tooth. There is no splendid national costume, only the most ordinary sweat-shirt and loose-legged pants. The dynamics of the dance are also completely missing the dashing and agile skills of Han folk dance. Not only do they perform hunched over, wobbling steps, but they also sometimes make exaggerated “strange faces.” The content of the dance has completely abandoned the “artistic realm” and is thoroughly integrated into the most ordinary life. The flirting and banter between the old couple makes people laugh. In any case, it does not seem like a national folk dance art work created for elegant performance venues in the traditional sense. However, such a work won unanimous applause when it was performed at the theater, and it has been featured frequently on television and media. *Old Companions* has become a canonical work of a certain kind.

The choreographer Jin Miaomiao 靳苗苗, as part of the new generation of academy-style folk dance choreographers, shows a different relaxed mentality and cleverness in *Old Companions*. She is not shy about pursuing



Fig. 30. *Old Companions*, 2002. Choreographer: Jin Miaomiao.  
Performers: Wu Jingjing, Mo Song of Beijing Dance Academy.  
Photographer: Ye Jin.

“vulgarity.” Jin explains, “*Old Companions* is actually much more ‘vulgar.’ Its style is more simple and more lifelike. However, this kind of life has a kind of flirtatious exaggeration, so that the dance breaks through the limits of ‘old age,’ with more vitality and tension. And the humor created by this treatment is actually quite lifelike, and without words, everyone can understand and laugh.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, “vulgarity” is not vulgarity, but life. The “vulgarity” that Jin Miaomiao pursues actually more closely approaches the joy of life. To get closer, she is willing to break the standard style and national spirit that the academy-style national folk dance is proud of, and the deformed and exaggerated movement vocabulary almost makes the categorization of Han folk dance unrecognizable. Only vague traces of the movements of *guzi yangge* and Jiaozhou *yangge* can be seen, as well as some movement characteristics of puppet theater. In particular, the exaggerated deformation of the *guzi*

*yangge* and Jiaozhou *yangge* makes the national “representativeness” lightly turn into a joke of life. *Old Companions* uses the same folk dance material, but it contrasts greatly with a work like *East Is Red*, which embodies a grand spirit of the nation. However, this treatment actually allows *Old Companions* to continue the tradition of comedic performance of Han folk dance, but this comedy has a modern flirtatious meaning. The exaggerated gesture of the old woman hanging on her partner with her legs in the splits and the old man playing guitar with a cattail-leaf fan both have a touch of absurdity and nonsense. This also forms a clear contrast with the more elegant artistic treatment in *A Green Leaf*. Thus, while we are astounded by and get lost in the large modulations of movements in *A Green Leaf*, our attention to the modulation of movements in *Old Companions* is dispelled by the appeal of the folksy aesthetic.

As the most subversive aesthetic taste of our time, absurdity and nonsense have become pervasive in contemporary public life. The films of Stephen Chow and the plays of Meng Jinghui have proved that this style of touching the essence of things through playful, flirtatious, and cynical appearances is accepted and loved by people compared to those pretentious and profound forms of expression. Many people misunderstand the absurd and nonsensical style as a kind of playfulness and cynicism, which intentionally or unintentionally diminishes the canon. However, from the point of view of the times, it is indeed a very active, successful, individualistic, and widely accepted aesthetic style of our era. As the art of the people, which “comes from the masses and goes to the masses,” national folk dance actually has the most civilian spirit, and it is also the most compatible with the absurd and nonsensical aesthetic style of the contemporary masses. This style embodied in *Old Companions* is actually quite limited, but we can already see the beginning of contemporary popular interest in the creation of national folk dances. Behind the seemingly illogical and irrational dynamic expression, it is actually full of the joy of life and ordinary true feelings. The pursuit of infinite joy at a limited height is the essence of nonsense and of ordinary life. No matter how humorous traditional national folk dance is, this kind of style undoubtedly could not come out of it. Of course, absurdity and nonsense do not mean pure farce. It often touches the heart after the laughter, so that the smile should also be touched by a ray of tears. The same is true for *Old Companions*, to which Jin Miaomiao is very sensitive. She writes, “I was also wary of falling into excessive vulgarity, so in the second half of the piece I let the

emotions of old companions flow with pop songs like the years passing by. The emotion is quiet, but still relatable."<sup>73</sup> Because of this, *Old Companions* doesn't get bogged down in the humor per se but ends by elevating the joy of life to the emotional level of human life. During the song *Days* (*Rizi* 日子), the old couple can't stand up straight and can't walk anymore, but they can still clasp their hands and send each other a look of affection. At that moment, the lifelong feeling of mutual support offers a most touching interpretation of the two ordinary words "old companions." The most absolutely ordinary feelings are often those that are the most infectious, and the tears within laughter make the meaning of *Old Companions* sublimated from the trivial details of life. It is interesting to note that the music at the end is a modern pop song by Xiao Ke, which completely breaks away from the traditional folk music in the first half of the piece. This once again conveys the modern atmosphere of life, as well as the commonality of the universal emotions of life through time and space.

*Old Companions* does not necessarily have the traditional canonical national folk dance vocabulary, but it certainly has the traditional folk spirit that is extended in contemporary times. In particular, the emergence of absurdity and nonsensical style allowed the contemporary aesthetic taste of the public to be blended into the traditional national folk dance form and be recognized by mainstream stage creation for the first time. Although it is far from the mainstream of contemporary national folk dance choreography, or even is a very marginal phenomenon, it is a very meaningful sign. The slightest pleasure of life is perhaps the true meaning of folk dance. Jin Miaomiao is therefore bold enough to say with conviction that all her pursuits and creative process are consistent and continuous, that is, "Close to the audience! Closer and closer!" The emergence of *Old Companions* is the dilution of "national" and the promotion of "folk" in the concept of "national folk dance." Of course, the "folk" here is not a complete return to traditional folklore but the spirit of being close to the folk embodied in the contemporary creative practice.

Grand themes and small pleasures of life reflect the huge differences and dynamism in the pursuit of diversification in contemporary national folk dance choreography. Indeed, when we focus more on the movement dimension of national folk dance, even within the aesthetic scope of Chinese characteristics, our creation will wander outside the traditional culture and find considerable freedom of artistic expression.

### 2.1.8. The Exciting Continuation of Traditional Culture

The strong vitality of traditional culture in national folk dance has become a dominant force in its creation. Therefore, despite the diversified innovations in contemporary national folk dance choreography, the exciting continuation of traditional culture is still the mainstream phenomenon. It's just that in the manner of continuing traditional culture, a variety of methods have appeared. In particular, those regions with deep national folk dance traditions, with the advantage of "resources," are not swayed by the creation of academy-style folk dance. Although the training of these movement systems is not yet so standardized, and the stage creation is not so exemplary, their diverse forms and vigor are closer to the origin of national folk dance and are very worthy of attention.

The 1997 Uyghur group dance *Bowl Balancing Dance* (*Ding wan wu* 顶碗舞) is a typical contemporary stage presentation of traditional dance culture. The work has no profound artistic expression but merely embellishes the traditional form of Uyghur folk dance to the extreme, presenting it on the stage in a simple way and conveying an enjoyable pleasure to the eyes. However, what makes the dance movements in *Bowl Balancing Dance* touching is not simply the external beauty of the form. It comes from the deeper traditional cultural connotation, from the fusion between the external movements and this cultural meaning. In particular, the choreographer and dancers come from the homeland of the Uyghur people, and their deep-rooted national emotions and the cultural temperament of the Central Asian music and dance deeply infused in their bodies give *Bowl Balancing Dance* a moving and beautiful serenity. A simple step, a slight movement of the shoulders, or a gentle glance all become profoundly meaningful because of their connection to traditional culture. The traditional structure of the grand song is just the right rhythm, and the Central Asian dance style, which is free and light, carries thousands of years of history and culture. Its charm is not diminished at all. This is a cultural cultivation and cultural accumulation of strength without the slightest room for falsehood. Of course, *Balancing Bowl Dance* does not remain in the old traditional culture. It makes full use of the contemporary stage technology and level of dance training, raising the choreography and performance quality of *Balancing Bowl Dance* to a much higher level. The complexity of the rhythmic movements, the skillful turning of the dancers' bodies, the neatness of the dance formations, and the perfection of the stage visual effects all reflect the new progress. However,



Fig. 31. *Bowl Balancing Dance*, 2002. Performed by Guzila and others of Xinjiang Autonomous Region Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Ye Jin.

this progress does not make any major deformation to the traditional dance movement form, nor does it make any major changes to the performance form, nor does it give the dance an artistic expression beyond the level of folk culture. So, it is a progress on the path of maintaining traditional culture. The modern aesthetic visual impact has shorted the historical distance of time and space, so that *Balancing Bowl Dance* possesses both the aesthetic flavor of keeping up with the times and the cultural charm of returning to what is pure.

The deep technical skills of the dancers in *Balancing Bowl Dance* are also a great highlight. Due to their close cultural background to the form, the dancers' understanding and mastery of the dance vocabulary are highly consistent. The degree of unity in the rhythm, speed, and amplitude of the movements is astonishing, and the dancers' consistent technical level is also

very impressive. The “bowl balancing” itself is a difficult demonstration of skill, and in such a large group dance, the overall level of the performers is extremely high. At the climax of the dance, the rapid rotation drives the skirts flying all over the stage, but the bowls on top of the head remain as stable as a rock. In a melodious music, the dance abruptly ends. The girls gather together, smiling like flowers, holding the bowls with their hands, a ray of water gently cascading down, and the dance’s aftereffects linger in the air. The *Balancing Bowl Dance* uses the simplest manner to continue traditional dance culture, and this pure traditional beauty is precisely the depth of cultural immersion. In fact, the attractiveness of culture and the splendor of technique should be the most essential aesthetic power of national folk dance. If we can grasp these two points in choreography, we can present the purest soul of national folk dance.

*Areniu* (*Areniu* 阿惹妞) is another folk dance choreography of the same period, but this one is less purely a continuation of tradition. It devises an elaborate dramatic conflict to create characters and vent emotions. The work is based on an ancient Yi wedding custom and legend: an older male cousin is carrying his younger female cousin on his back as he walks to her husband’s house to get married. No one would have thought that the two of them were in fact childhood sweethearts and lovers. The separation is already heartbreaking, but it is far less than the unspeakable pain of burying one’s happiness with one’s own hands. Fate has put a helpless exclamation point on the life of love. Such a dramatic inner conflict of emotions becomes the core of the artistic expression of the dance. Although the movement style of Yi folk dance continues in the work, the traditional culture rendered by the movement has become just the background of a love tragedy. We are no longer concerned with the ethnic style of the movement language but instead with the fate of the characters. The ancient legends and mysterious culture only make us step out of the urban space and time and let out a sigh for the lack of free love. In the face of such national folk dances, the modern audience becomes the “novelty-seeking” caretaker of the traditional culture. Behind this there is actually a sense of superiority and good fortune of having free love in the new era.

Behind the national style of the dance movements, *Areniu* highlights a significant expansion of artistic expression in national folk dance choreography. The dance movements are no longer merely cultural displays or simple emotional expressions. They are closely linked to the characters’ personalities and emotional entanglements, forming a complex vehicle for the inter-



Fig. 32. *Areniu*, 1997. Performed by Li Qing, Jiang Tiehong, and others of Sichuan Provincial Song and Dance Theater. Photographer: Ye Jin.

play of situations. This is a significant development on the foundation of the traditional style of folk dance. The ancient and austere dynamics of Yi dance have been incorporated into modern choreography, resulting in a large number of novel dance dynamics. Yet, the arrangement of every movement has an internal reason related to emotion. For example, the male protagonist leaps on his knees to reflect his inner excitement, while he arches his body backward to express his extreme pain. The extreme range of movements corresponds to the extreme state of emotion. The female protagonist's steps are light when she remembers her joy, and they shake when she is sad. The delicate shifts express subtle changes in emotion. Especially in the classic duet



dance at the end, there are a lot of special effects of duet contact and embracing. It has the characteristics of Yi dance but also uses partnering technique to show the intertwined emotions of two people to the fullest. The shape of the female protagonist's body curling backward into a ring and falling on the male protagonist's rigid body becomes a condensed symbol, highlighting the heartbreaking pain and inseparable love between the two. Although *Areniu* is no longer a mere display of local dance style, the use of traditional Yi folk dance continues to keep the characters within the traditional cultural background. This makes the tragedy of love more real and more shocking. It sets an example for the use of traditional materials in national folk dance choreography to express the emotions of the characters in traditional cultural time and space.

Some national folk dance choreography gives new meaning and imagination to common traditional folk images. *Young Man—Four Strings—Silk Tree Flower* (*Xiaohuo—sixian—mayinghua* 小伙·四弦·马樱花) uses a funny and cheerful style to portray the story of a young man from the Yi ethnic group who falls in love. What is especially creative about the work is that in a theme of romantic love, there are no women, but only three men in a "trio." In the Yi cultural tradition, playing a ukulele-like instrument with four strings becomes a joking term for "talking about love," while the silk tree flower becomes the symbol of women. The silk tree flower is originally a totem of Yi worship and permeates the life of Yi people, including their love life. Using the silk tree flower as a metaphor for a girl is not only apt but also full of traditional cultural characteristics. The three boys hold the flower in their mouths or hands or jump or crawl, showing their different personality traits. The three of them encircle a silk tree flower, both competing and showing off, full of fun. The traditional images from folkloric material are cleverly choreographed as a medium for appreciating traditional culture. The rich dance vocabularies of Yunnan's ethnic minorities provide an inexhaustible source for choreography. For example, the movement of walking on the hands and feet while in a backbend engraved the dance with a deep ethnic cultural imprint. *The Cow Back Cradle* (*Niu bei yaolan* 牛背摇篮) uses the dancing human body to imitate yaks on the mountain plateau. The yak, known as the "boat of the plateau," is a faithful partner in the life and labor of the Tibetan people and is also worshipped and loved as a deity in folklore and religious culture. In the dance, the male dancer uses his arms and back to simulate the sharp horns and solid back of a yak, lifting and protecting the young girl playing on its back. In this anthropomorphic per-



Fig. 33. *Young Man—Four Strings—Silk Tree Flower*, 1998. Performed by Yunnan Provincial Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Ye Jin.

formance, the bull and the human have a kind of emotional communication with nature. The meaning of the bull in life is elevated, the connotation of the bull in culture is brought to life, and the solid back of the bull becomes the cradle of human growth. In the humblest folk life, the beauty of harmony between human beings and nature must have the power to move the hearts of people in modern cities. From these two examples, we can see that, based on the deep understanding of traditional material images, the exploration of their connotation and the extension of their meaning have elevated the traditional folk life itself as an object of expression in national folk dance choreography.

Creating a new dance vocabulary on the basis of traditional national folk dances and using this vocabulary to express the connotations of traditional culture is still a prominent and common phenomenon in choreography. The Yi group dance *Amoreniu* (*Amoreniu* 阿嫫惹妞) means “mother’s son.” This



Fig. 34. *Cow Back Cradle*, 1997.  
Choreographers: Su Zihong,  
Sega. Photographer: Ye Jin.

work can become a highlight of folk dance creation precisely because of the traditional cultural glow that emanates from it. The work expresses the power of social reproduction constructed by the deep affection of mother and son. The creation of typical dynamics has long been a tradition and specialty of Sichuan choreography. The rapid hand-waving and foot-stomping dance movements in *Happy Nuoso* have been a typical dynamic that has been handed down for a long time. And it is also the typical motion that grabs people's attention and memory in *Amoreniu*. The female dancers in *Amoreniu* support each other back and forth, bending from the waist and swaying from side to side, winding out an earthy and simple maternal social heritage in a unique rhythm. Their bodies are tough in their bending. Their simple swaying rhythm is like the rhythm of the cradle of life, while the soft curving line of the march is like the flowing tune of life. The "mother's son" grows up in this rhythm of life, and what we see is clearly not a mother and her son but the continuation of the life of a community. Isn't the classic women's group dance movement just like the pulse that beats softly but strongly, which is a symbol of the continuous life? Obviously, the typical dynamics described above are not authentic unchanged folk dances. But as



Fig. 35. *Amoreniu*, 2002. Performed by Sichuan Provincial Song and Dance Theater. Photographer: Ye Jin.

a creation of dance art, we no longer need to test it. What we are more concerned about is not the exact copying of tradition but the profound understanding, interpretation, and expression of traditional culture by the current generation. When such a dynamic is so vividly and accurately stored within the traditional culture and national characteristics, it is not only a respect for the tradition but also the continuation and development of that tradition.

Those listed here are only some of the different ways that national folk dance choreography continues traditional culture, and it is obvious that these practices in such a large number of choreographies cannot be summarized in a word. However, it is important to see that in different ways the continuation of the presentation and understanding of traditional culture has been the mainstream phenomenon of contemporary national folk dance choreography. Although different perspectives and ideas have been used to interpret and express traditional culture, traditional culture itself has always been at the center, so that the creation of national folk dance has been maintained within a moderate range. This way of creation has also become the mainstream of national folk dance choreography.

### 2.1.9. Fashion's Assault on the Senses and the Trendy "Original Ecology"

In China at the beginning of the century, under the strong impetus of the market economy, there was increasingly open and legal recognition of the market-oriented path of literature and art. This directly intensified the trend of folk dance choreography to become "fashionable" and caused considerable controversy. Unlike the previous controversies arising from the innovation of folk dance with the times, the controversy about "fashionization" had a deeper sense of contemporary theoretical reflection and cultural crisis.

China Song and Dance Company's 2002 large-scale song and dance production *Journey to a Secret World* (*Mijing zhi lu* 秘境之旅) can be considered a representative gala of the "fashionization" of national folk dance choreography. In this gala performance, a number of modern and fashionable dance works appeared. Coincidentally, the folk dance of the Dai people, the peacock dance, once again became the focus of attention and transformation. This time the name of the dance became *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* (*Bibo kongque* 碧波孔雀), revealing a beautiful scene of bright colors. As described in the China Central Television column *Dance World*, "A sound of brass bell-like laughter arises from the water's surface, and the delicate silhouettes of the Dai maidens appear and disappear in the mist; they are like the sprites of the blue waves moving their arms, drawing up the mysterious spring water; they are like the peacocks of the emerald forest lightly spreading their wings, stirring up a hundred birds!"<sup>74</sup> After the gender breakthrough of peacock dance in the 1950s and the divine beauty of *Spirit of the Peacock* in the 1980s, *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* completely abandoned the indirectness of women imitating a peacock in the traditional peacock dance and instead expressed the beautiful girls in a straightforward manner. The peacock is no longer a symbol of female beauty, but a beautiful woman like the peacock herself becomes the object of expression. The traditional cultural connotation in "viridescent wave peacock" is reduced to a vacuum in flamboyant and seductive navel-revealing dresses, and the peacock imagery, once alive in history and culture, becomes an insignificant gimmick, with the women and their dancing bodies coming to the fore. Both in music and dance, *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* is also fierce and modern in the way it expresses female beauty. The score breaks away from the traditional Dai music composition and adopts modern music rhythms and internationally popular orchestration techniques, giving the music of *Viridescent*



Fig. 36. *Viridescent Wave Peacocks*, 2002. Performed by China Song and Dance Ensemble. Photographer: Ye Jin.

*Wave Peacocks* a fresh and fashionable charm in addition to its strong Dai flavor. Matching this, the choreography is also a combination of traditional Dai folk dance mixed with elements of Western jazz dance and competitive ballroom dance. These “fashionable” elements do not appear in a weak way but rather with the bold and outwardly projecting body that runs counter to traditional culture, completing overturning the appearance of traditional Dai dance. When the “viridescent wave peacocks” exaggeratedly sway their chests and hips to the exuberant rhythm, the noble peacocks descend into women of the night.

If we fix our focus on *Viridescent Wave Peacocks*, we will find that this dramatic transformation of the peacock dance is not like that of *Spirit of the Peacock*, which was less surprising. Rather, it once again triggered the “peacock dance controversy.” In an article, Liu Jian used *Spirit of the Peacock*, *Golden Peacock* (*Jinse de kongque* 金色的孔雀), *Peacock Flies* (*Kongque fei lai* 孔雀飞来), and *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* as typical dances to sort out the historical chain of peacock dance creation and development. The peacock is an auspicious deity in Hinayana Buddhism, so the traditional peacock dance, which is danced by men with props, is a “religious dance with a religious theme.” With the enhancement of aesthetics, the folk peacock dance came onto the stage and became not only female but also much more beautiful in form; it also became a “secular dance with a religious theme.” The gestures in *Spirit of the Peacock* are not just an imitation of the peacock’s head. More importantly, they have the original quality of Indian mudras, thus emitting the peacock’s divine light and proclaiming, “I am a diety.” *Golden Peacock* uses a beautiful female dance to proclaim, “I please the gods.” *Peacock Flies* uses a clever young girl’s dance to proclaim, “I am a human.” *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* uses “a completely different language system of the body, movement and speed” to declare, “I please humans,” while at the same time proclaiming, “The sacred signs of the peacock and the symbols of the community” are completely lost.<sup>75</sup> The dilution of religious themes and the enhancement of entertainment aesthetics in peacock dance are inevitable developments of the times. But, we are also faced with the phenomenon of adulteration by a “completely different language system” of foreign dance cultures and the strong pressure of market entertainment. From this we can see the obvious influence of the contemporary cultural environment on the choreographer’s dance body. Compared to the cultural genres and commodity impact that the early choreographers were exposed to, the breadth of genres and the intensity of assault on today’s choreographers are enormous. It is difficult for them to maintain the simplicity of folk art in the midst of all the confusion.

It is true that the connotation of this “peacock dance controversy” is different from that of the 1950s. If the controversy in the 1950s was more due to the lack of social and cultural openness, the controversy this time was due to the excess of social and cultural openness. Since *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* challenged the moral bottom line of traditional culture, the focus of the controversy was not on the entanglement of tradition and innovation but on the standard of value judgment for literature and art and the market. As we can

see, the fashionableness of *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* is based on a modern aesthetic influenced by Western pop culture. From the rhythm to the revolution of physical expression, it makes the once traditional culture a distant dream. In *Journey to a Secret World*, works similar to *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* that show off the female body form a series. For example, *Mysterious Veil* (*Shenmi miansha* 神秘面纱) is based on the background of Uyghur folk dance culture. As described in *Dance World*, the dance depicts “the half-marked crescent moon creeping into the sky, and under the paradise-like magical green tree shade, a line of Uyghur maidens with light veils emerge, dancing softly and singing in the hazy night.” The scene of *Flaming Tenderness* (*Huoyan rouqing* 火焰柔情) is based on the background of Yi folk dance culture. *Dance World* writes, “Mysterious footsteps are heard in the woods—a group of Yi girls in elaborate costume hold hands and come to the moonlit forest clearing, where they reveal their hearts and share their secrets, dancing with their shawls floating and skirts flying. The bonfire is lit, and two flames jump up.”<sup>76</sup> Like the *Viridescent Wave Peacocks*, both of these dances emphasize the irreplaceable position of feminine aesthetics in their works. Yet, in addition to the charm of *Viridescent Wave Peacocks*, *Mysterious Veil* added a bit more mysterious seduction and *Flaming Tenderness* has more fire-like passion. The all-round display of women’s culture in these ethnic song and dance numbers is undoubtedly a kind of catering to the song and dance market. This corresponds to the beauty culture and body culture prevalent in the whole social and cultural environment.

There is no denying that the new dance elements and promotion of sensory entertainment made national folk dances such as *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* more “visually pleasing” and gave the audience a new and fashionable feeling. In fact, this is also the intention of the creators. The idea of the gala was to absorb all elements that can be used to enrich Chinese ethnic song and dance, to escape the restrictions of traditional concepts, in order to achieve the “new, strange, excellent, beautiful” in national folk song and dance. But after the amazement and wonder, one can’t help but ask: Did the audience really love it? Is this love based on art touching the heart or on the enjoyment of sensory stimulation? Although both are liking something, the two are obviously not on the same level.

It is under this question that we saw the discussion “The Fashionization of Ethnic Songs and Dances” on China Central Television’s *Studio 12*. It presented a “confrontation” between Peking University professor Wang Yuechuan 王岳川 and the director of the China Song and Dance Troupe and



general director of *Journey to a Secret World*, Chen Weiya 陈维亚. In Chen Weiya's view, the fashionization of ethnic songs and dances is "a necessity for artistic evolution and a necessity for the current market" and the latter is more urgent than the former. In the face of the growth of the younger generation, national folk dance must be appreciated by young audiences, so it is necessary to establish a channel of artistic and emotional communication with them. Although traditional art has value, how to make young people accept and love it is important. Therefore, the creation of national folk dance needs to find the essence of traditional song and dance art and also needs to continue to innovate. At the level of the market, we need to continue to occupy the market, "to have artistic communication and emotional communication," and at the same time have "a relationship between nurturing and being nurtured." Wang Yuechuan is more concerned about the "transient, disposable, quickly disappearing, and current trendiness" in the fashionization of folk songs and dances. He also discussed the deep concern brought by fashionization, that is, when traditional culture faces the Western world, "whether our bloodline, our symbols, and our fingerprints will gradually disappear." If we lose our "cultural lifeline, spiritual sensibility, and character" in the process of catching up with Western modernization, then our cultural exchange will become unidirectional, and we will not be able to export a culture with our own unique value. Even the West, in its radical modernization process, will reflect on its "something strong, competitive, instinctive, hysterical and subconscious." In turn, it will absorb useful elements from traditional Eastern culture. Instead, we have unconsciously allowed fashionization to make our own cultural traditions "transform" away.<sup>77</sup>

This is a tit-for-tat debate, but the result of the debate seems to have no absolute winner. Chen Weiya and Wang Yuechuan each established their own discourse systems, and there is little intersection between the two. Chen Weiya is more concerned with practical issues, while Wang Yuechuan is more concerned with metaphysical issues. As a choreographer and director, Chen Weiya is obviously more limited by the reality of his environment and more desperate for immediate results. The creation of stage performances must face the test of the market, and therefore it is difficult to escape the influence or even control of the market. Chen Weiya's discourse system is pragmatic, catering to the real world. Wang Yuechuan, on the other hand, as a cultural scholar, goes beyond the level of practical reality to reveal a sense of concern for the future. I think that it is precisely at such a moment that Wang demonstrates theoretical foresight. Theoretical

aspirations do not need to be proven by reality but rather need to show flexibility and depth of thought as well as a spiritual direction. The legitimacy of these assertions is proven by the future and is not threatened or coerced by current realities. Wang Yuechuan's discourse system is idealistic, and his thoughts can transcend reality to imagine and call for a better vision. Its value lies precisely in its transcendence of reality.

Therefore, it can be said that the misalignment of the two discourse systems has led to the ineffectiveness of the debate. Each approaches *Journey to a Secret World* in a different capacity and from a different angle of concern, with completely different standards of value judgment. From the perspective of the performance market, the national folk dance choreography *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* naturally takes the market as its standard of evaluation. The measure of commercial market performance from the perspective of process is planning and operation; from the perspective of creative method, it is suitability, packaging, and visual effects; and from the perspective of results, it is profit. *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* is clearly a product of this standard, and Chen Weiya's explanation clearly showed a strong identification with the market and the audience, as well as an intolerance toward blocking artistic communication. This has also influenced Chen Weiya's philosophy of artistic creation, which is that the fundamental problem of art is one of form. Whether a gala attracts people depends on the novelty of its artistic expression, and a new artistic form can often leave people a wider space of imagination. The pursuit of form in art is indisputable, and the pursuit of form in national folk dance choreography represented by *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* is also obvious. However, under the guidance of the market, it is limited to the shallow sensory stimulation, which ruthlessly tears apart the blood connection with tradition. For commercial art like this, the evaluation scale of art criticism in terms of spiritual enlightenment and cultural depth is empty. Thus, using pure art criticism to evaluate it appears powerless. This is like how Zhang Yimou's commercially oriented films *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* cannot be measured by the standards of art films. It is very successful by market standards, but using artistic standards, there is no place to begin.

Chen Weiya frankly said this: "Now the times are different. People who are engaged in academic research will look at this issue from the perspective of academic research, and we performance groups who do this kind of performance or even performance units more closely integrated with the market, we will look at it differently."<sup>78</sup> The ideal spiritual world and the

utilitarian real world are often separated most of the time. After the debate concluded, the host of *Studio 12*, while taking notes, had this to say:

A major reason for Mr. Wang Yuechuan's opposition to the fashionization of national songs and dances is because he is worried that the fashionable national folk songs and dances will not carry forward the method of expressing national emotions, and this will lead to a shared popular appearance for people all over the world. In fact, artists are also worried about this, but what can they do? Their source of creation has become completely dependent on market feedback, and their works have of course lost their individuality. The works that depend on the market have several characteristics, that is, an emphasis on production, false-individuality, and being commanded by technology.<sup>79</sup>

After the market and art form a relationship of "nurturing" and "being nurtured," artists have too much helplessness and temptation and can only waver between the two. After holding a "visual feast" with *Hero* and "touching people while making them laugh" with *House of Flying Daggers*, Zhang Yimou ended his journey of commercial films and returned to art cinema with *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, once again leaving a trace of spiritual afterglow. Similarly, the *Journey to a Secret World*, of which *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* is a representative work, should not be a final journey. Faced with the assault of the commodity market, the national folk dance choreography must also consider the issue of character and bloodline at the level of art.

We should see that, regarding the production standard of fashionable national folk dance, the exquisite and dazzling *Viridescent Wave Peacocks* reached a relatively high level. Of course, this is also the convention of market operation—large production and large investment to ensure a high level of production, to ensure the return of market investment. However, at the same time, we should also see that the influence of fashion has begun to extend to our national folk dance choreography in a large number of indiscriminate ways. In this case, we can see this through the alienation of the "peacock" character but overall in the decline of cultural taste. When this orientation spreads from commercial performance to all creative fields, the purity of art is polluted and the rationality of fashion is no longer relevant. For example, one of the direct side effects of fashion is the excessive pur-

suit of external packaging. The focus is on the new and the changed not only in movement form but also in costumes, lighting, choreography, and other means to pursue stimulation and luxury. When the famous American lighting design master Jennifer Tipton came to China in 2005 to offer workshops and saw some national folk dance performances, she found the luxury of Chinese stage lighting equipment and the overwhelming color and changes in lighting design incredible. These cabaret-style lights not only robbed national folk dance of its cultural content but also lowered the quality of artistic creation. Even in the highly developed United States, lighting designers don't use such a large amount of digital lighting and other equipment in the stage performance of dance. The excessive variation of the national folk dance movements causes even more loss of the traditional aesthetic quality. Therefore, the impact of excessive commercial fashion in the field of national folk dance choreography is very negative. But we obviously lack a clear understanding and definition of the criteria for judging the value of such different fields.

Of course, not all national folk dance choreography has chosen to follow the commodity market to carry out fashionable modern transformations, and the money-hungry commodity market sometimes follows those creations that adhere to their own traditional cultural values. In 2002, Yang Liping launched a large-scale original folk dance song and dance series, *Dynamic Yunnan* (*Yunnan yingxiang* 云南映象), which reintroduced the artistic spirit and value of traditional national folk dance. In this song and dance gala, "original ecology" (*yuan shengtai* 原生态) became an important concept, which increased the mysteriousness of culture and the attractiveness of the performance. Yang Liping explained the concept of "original ecology" as follows:

As for the "original ecology," it is the most natural and closest form of expression to human nature. The peasants believe that everything has a spirit, and people need to communicate with the sky and the earth, the 10,000 things and the spirits, and dance is the only way for people to communicate with everything. This is the reason why 70 percent of the performers in this song and dance production are peasants. . . . The peasants dance out of affection for nature and all things, out of the necessity of life. Only those who have such feelings can truly embody what is meant by original ecology.<sup>80</sup>



Fig. 37. *Dynamic Yunnan*, 2004. Performed by Dynamic Yunnan Art Ensemble. Photographer: Ye Jin.

In this explanation, Yang Liping attributes the core element of “original ecology” to the dancing peasants, because they are the people who really inherit the original songs and dances in the folklore, and the traditional national folk dance culture has been integrated with their lives and emotions. The dances they dance naturally have the meaning of “original ecology.” In response to this point, Zi Huayun offers a theoretical clarification of the definition:

“Original ecology” culture has a relatively strict definition, that is: the original form (basically without processing and packaging); the original ecology (not separated from the natural and human environment in which it was created and developed); natural or quasi-natural transmission. It is the essence of wood and the source of water—shared by people and artists alike. *Dynamic Yunnan* is clearly a stage work of art created by an artist, with the artist’s individual creation and a considerable degree of stage packaging, not the “adobe” of folk art.<sup>81</sup>

This shows that “original ecology” is a complete cultural system and style that not only is related to the people who pass it on but, more importantly,

maintains its original form and natural way of transmission in its original environment. Although *Dynamic Yunnan* uses a 70 percent peasant cast, and although they retain their cultural authenticity in their own bodies, their dances have been removed from their native environment and placed onstage. The dances not only have undergone simple processing in terms of form but also have been packaged through stage effects in a very artistic and modern way. So, *Dynamic Yunnan* is not truly “original ecology.” However, Yang Liping, while creating this piece, truly went deeply into the original environment of ethnic dance culture and inherited the profound research and practice foundation of her predecessors. In this way, she gave *Dynamic Yunnan* a strong sense of original meaning. In the midst of a series of flashy national folk dance creations, the original meaning of *Dynamic Yunnan* explodes with the deepest power.

It is true that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in a literary and art market where hype and fashion were prevalent, there were too many national folk dance performances that raised expectations and disappointed people. For us, however, *Dynamic Yunnan* was a breath of fresh air in the midst of the materialistic world, and it took hold of our hearts. The primitive drumming will shake away all distractions, and the rising and falling “seaweed tune” of the flower-waist Yi people will bring tears to your eyes without your even realizing it. Even with all the anticipation and preparation, everything will touch you all of a sudden when it is too late to think. There is no choice but to let one’s emotions run wild and to immerse oneself in the inexplicably moving *Dynamic Yunnan*. *Drum Song* (*Da ge* 打歌), *Woman’s Country* (*Nüren guo* 女人国), *Cigarette Box Dance* (*Yanhe wu* 烟盒舞)—one piece after another swept by at the speed of a heartbeat. The tears had dried, but the heart was alive.

It’s hard to remember the last time something was so deeply moving. This is not the kind of moving that is “forced” because of a specific story or because of the fate of a certain person. This is a summoning of the audience from the netherworld, a natural outpouring of emotion that comes from the depths of the heart. This touch is innate, has always been dormant in a corner of the soul, just forgotten by us in the process of growth. It does not need a reason, just like we will be touched by the childishness and innocence of childhood, because childhood shines with our once innocent times. Perhaps even earlier, when we were embryos in our mothers’ wombs, when we were immersed in amniotic fluid to draw the nutrients of life, the first sense of being moved already existed. The song and dance production *Dynamic Yun-*

*nan* certainly goes far beyond the experience of an individual life, mapping out all of humanity's early childhood temperament. Isn't this the case? The songs and dances that come directly from the original ecology are not about individual lives but about a group culture shared by all individual lives and a group culture with a strong sense of primitive remains. This is what attracts people to the traditional mountain culture of Yunnan. The mountains hindered communication and openness, slowing the progress of modernity. They have also preserved the precious cultural imprints of early mankind.

In the Yi sacred drum song, it is sung: "When heaven and earth were chaotic, there was no sun and no moon, and it was dark all around; when you beat it, the east side lit up; when you beat it again, the west side lit up." Is this not the most primitive and naive communication between human and nature at the beginning of the chaos of life? Thus, in the opening scene of *Dynamic Yunnan*, the sound of the sacred drums permeates an ecstatic primitive atmosphere. When the final drums come to a screeching halt and the rain pours down in silence, at that moment, human and nature reach a spiritual unity and the most beautiful harmony. Today, we no longer face nature with sincerity as we did in our childhood, but we are using technology to frantically transform and destroy it.

When the girls of the flower-waist Yi people hold hands, their bodies shake with simple rhythms and they sing the bright "seaweed tune." Even if you know nothing about the lyrics, the melodious and varied singing carries a strong sentimental quality that will sweep you away in a flash like a breaking tide. It is not sad but moving, like in a dream returning to a long-lost home. The moist air, the smell of the earth, the image of childhood are all so intoxicating. The most popular music today is also dwarfed by this moment. *Drum Song* and *Cigarette Box Dance* continue the eternal topic of sex between man and woman. The men in *Drum Song* finally conquer the women in a nearly exhausting diagonal orgy, and the images of their backs as they carry the women back in triumph exemplify the natural instincts of life. In the lively melody of *Cigarette Box Dance*, men and women perform various gestures imitating animal sexual intercourse, highlighting the major issue of life that early humans faced devoutly and directly in reproduction. This is so different from our increasingly indifferent and fearful attitude toward reproduction today.

Almost all of the dance movements in *Dynamic Yunnan* are in the peasant dancers' own vocabulary: rice planting, millstone turning, bull-head dance, insect intercourse, and so on. All of these are masterpieces of dance

that have accumulated thousands of years of tradition and cannot be passed on overnight. All these songs and dances from the original ecology are like bloodlines that support the life of *Dynamic Yunnan*. Even the dance masters can't perform their dances, and even the music masters have to admire their songs. This is because in them, life and song and dance have become one, because in them, one can see the earliest pure condition of the art of song and dance. Modern technology is advancing rapidly, and the development of mankind today has long since moved away from the primitive childhood. We can go to the moon, we can explore Mars, but even if we can freely travel in space and look down at the azure planet, it is impossible to fully understand where "I" actually came from. We can study genes, we can clone life, but even if we can freely copy the best human race, it is impossible to fully answer who "we" really are. The ultimate confusion of the future makes people miss the initial simplicity of the past. People often say, "We arrive naked and go without worries." It's really true—we can lose everything, even if the world is destroyed, back to the barbarism; the last thing people will have is their own body and mind. The answer behind the pomp and circumstance may be hidden in our earliest home. *Dynamic Yunnan* creates a reflected image of the body and mind, not only of the traditional culture of Yunnan but also of the human home.

This is exactly the problem faced by much national folk dance choreography today. That is, the choreographies have ignored and forgotten the core of life of traditional folk dance culture. Many people are lost in the tendency of pursuing modern formal beauty. They keep on painting and powdering the face of folk dance, dressing it up carefully, imperceptibly burying the most essential soul and cultural spirit of folk dance under the thick powder, making it hard to distinguish the true appearance. We cannot ask for a pause in socioeconomic development to preserve the most primitive culture for our modern appreciation. But *Dynamic Yunnan* makes us believe that we can find some way to envision a return to spirituality and culture today, or at least to remove the makeup from staged folk dance and allow it to shine. Frankly, my appreciation of *Dynamic Yunnan* is one-sided, and I am strongly partial to the real "dancers" from the folk and their dances. Although Yang Liping incorporated her own dance masterpieces such as *Spirit of the Peacock* and *Two Trees* into the entire evening, it was more of a clever integration and arrangement. Even the multimedia images in *Home (Jiayuan 家园)* and the illusion of flying peacocks in the finale of *Spirit of the Peacock* paled next to the most straightforward body language.



Yang Liping is not carrying out completely new creation. I prefer to think of her as completing a project, a journey toward artistic maturity and perfection. In her creative journal, Yang Liping writes: "When I was a child, my grandmother told me that dancing is for speaking with the gods. Many years later, I understood her words. Whenever I dance in my heart with my arms outstretched, I feel that my arms are infinitely extended and stretched, and then the gods will hold my hands. I can feel my soul floating away from my body, and this wonderful feeling makes my soul the most quiet and peaceful." I deeply feel that one of the gods that Yang Liping talks with through dance is a piece of memory from human's childhood time. Yang Liping may not have understood it when she was a child, but she understood it after she grew up, and this is the return of her spirit to her childhood as an adult. Yang Liping herself calls her journey through the mountains and forests of Yunnan in search of traditional culture a "spiritual journey." It is this "spiritual journey" to the roots of human childhood that has greatly enhanced Yang Liping's earlier works of art. If her early beautiful representative dance works were light and airy, and they always lacked a bit of life and cultural weight, then in *Dynamic Yunnan*, which was created after the "spiritual journey," she reintegrated her representative works into the traditional dances of Yunnan and gained a new life. Like a tree that has found its roots and like water that has found its source, her dance has become less ethereal and more realistic, with a flush of life on the face of a nymph who does not eat the fire and smoke of people. In the slightly lengthy ending, Yang Liping still lets her *Spirit of the Peacock* perch on the branch of her hometown.

Yang Liping through her "spiritual journey" found the source of artistic life. Following her journey, we have found a teardrop of humanity's childhood. Because of this, perhaps for more professionals, the shocking power of the original song and dance is far greater than Yang Liping's own dances. But from the perspective of the more commercial performance market, the interplay between Yang Liping's dance and the original ecology dance becomes an unusual sight and a good selling point. Yang Liping's popularity is undoubtedly an important capital for the success of the show. However, what is really admirable is that while so many choreographers are lost in the vicious circle of modern forms, Yang Liping is able to persistently return to the place of culture where she was born and raised to feel the real source of life. Such cultural consciousness is admirable. She once said: "I hate to wear tight pants to dance Tibetan dance, wearing half high heels to dance ethnic dance. It's completely incompatible. This development will only be

chaos. I don't understand the profound theories in the academy. My requirement for dance is very simple: remove the acid, avoid the sweet, and avoid the miscellaneous."<sup>82</sup> These words undoubtedly questioned the pursuit of formal sensory stimulation, the arbitrary alienation of national folk dance, and the obsession with purification of broad folk dance in the ivory tower. The requirements of national folk dance were restored to their simplest and initial state, and the pursuit of the original meaning of dance brought a strong shock to the audience, including the professionals in the dance circle. It should be seen that the shock of this return was magnified by its contrast with the fashionable trend of pursuing the new and the different. Some even called it "the re-enlightenment of dance." The significance of the enlightenment does not lie simply in the complete return but in the significance of that "origin" to revising considerations within rapid development. It's like a deeply emotional call from the hometown, so that we do not forget the homeland in our pursuit.

The commercial market doesn't just favor art that follows the trend. Those who stand out as guardians of art also have the opportunity to turn the market's greedy hand. With the persistence of watching over the national dance homeland, *Dynamic Yunnan* became a cultural phenomenon that began to ferment and won the market. Not only has the show been a hit on its domestic tour, but it was also a huge success on Broadway in the United States. According to reports, this year *Dynamic Yunnan* is said to be entering the United States with more than five hundred performances, bringing in over \$100 million in revenue.<sup>83</sup> More than in terms of the market revenue, we should see the significance of *Dynamic Yunnan* in terms of cultural dissemination. It is a testament to Wang Yuechuan's point about cultural export: the culture we export should have its own lifeblood, spirituality, and character.

The success of *Dynamic Yunnan's* presentation of original song and dance actually coincided with a broader social context in which the idea and activity of saving and preserving intangible cultural heritage was gradually emerging as a cultural hotspot in China. The definition of "intangible cultural heritage" in official documents is almost a direct translation of the official UNESCO explanation: "The oral and intangible heritage of humanity (also known as intangible cultural heritage) is a concept that is relative to tangible heritage, i.e., the tangible heritage that can be transmitted. It refers to various traditional cultural expressions (such as folklore activities, performing arts, traditional knowledge and skills, as well as the instruments,

objects, and handicrafts related to them) and cultural spaces that have been passed down from generation to generation by people of all nationalities and are closely related to the lives of the masses.” As early as October 1989, the twenty-fifth session of UNESCO adopted the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*, recommending that countries around the world take action as soon as possible to preserve, protect, and disseminate folk creations, which are the common heritage of all humanity. As a result, in 2000 UNESCO launched the nomination process of “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity,” and after this the Chinese government has paid more attention to and promoted this work. As a cultural style transmitted orally, folk dance is obviously an important element of intangible cultural heritage. Against this backdrop, *Dynamic Yunnan* emerged at the right time to serve as a model and inspiration. For a while, the “original ecology” style that had been the object of artistic innovation and deconstruction in the blink of an eye became a “fashionable” style that was successively presented onstage.

The phenomenon of “original ecology” becoming fashionable had great significance from a cultural perspective. It meant that after the opening of the country’s doors and the process of cultural pluralism, we have started to take care of our own cultural system again, and the traditional values of culture have again been presented. However, new problems have emerged along with this. The concept of “original ecology” has been deformed in some circulation and use, even becoming a label for show and a gimmick to apply for funding, losing the serious meaning of cultural preservation. Some people arbitrarily labeled the dances presented onstage as “original ecology” without thorough investigation, which not only distorted the original meaning of original ecology but also confused the original face of traditional culture. This will not have a positive effect on the protection of intangible cultural heritage, but will cause irreparable harm.

Another question worthy of our deep consideration is, For the national folk dance choreography, when we again respect and reacquaint ourselves with the “original ecological style,” how should we look at the long-standing path of inheritance and innovation of Chinese national folk dance creation?

In 2005, there was a trend in the National Folk Dance Competition in the fifth Chinese Dance “Lotus Prize.” That is, the evaluation favored dance works close to the original ecological style. The Uyghur group dance *Dolan People* (*Daolang ren* 刀郎人) was one such work. It came from the remote Tarim Song and Dance Ensemble in Aksu, Xinjiang, and was obviously not

very “modernized” in terms of choreography. In an interview, the lead dancer, Jurat Osman, said that he was very upset that young people today are very happy to learn Western dances like Latin, disco, and ballet and that the true roots of their own dance culture have been forgotten. So, he was determined, along with the other dancers, to create a dance that truly recreates the dance culture of his own Dolan people. To “truly recreate” means to “search for the roots,” to try hard to dig out the most rooted dance culture, and to faithfully present the purest dance style. That’s why in *Dolan People* we don’t notice so many choreographic techniques but instead have a taste of a more unique “Dolan” culture with the color of the oasis. In the rugged and bold music and dance, we seem to have stepped into the Gobi and the yellow sand where the Dolan people reside. We seem to feel the perseverance of the Dolan people in the midst of hardship and suffering. I believe that this style presented in *Dolan People*, which is different from typical joyful Uyghur dance works, gives the work its unique cultural value. The dancers’ innate Dolan temperament deservedly earned them the gold medal for their performance.

However, in that year’s competition, it was obvious that when judging works with a high degree of creativity, such as *Walking* (*Xingzou* 行走), by the criterion of being close to the original style and reproducing traditional cultural values, one is caught in a contradiction. For a long time, the styles of our national folk dance choreographies presented onstage became more and more canonized, artistic, and diversified, and these innovative achievements gained through long-term development of creativity cannot be simply denied. Otherwise, that will only bring about a regression in creativity. Therefore, we must see that, in fact, there is a huge gap between works like *Dolan People* and *Walking* in terms of creation time and space, and the degree of development of creation is not the same and not equal. The degree of regional economic and cultural development determines that *Dolan People*, which came from the Gobi, can reproduce the original style. Likewise, it determines that *Walking*, which was born in the metropolis, is inevitably far from the original style in terms of aesthetics. What is worth revisiting is that when we define “original” more as a concept associated with long-standing traditions or even “backward” areas, have we relatively ignored the tense and style of “urban original”? It is important to see that the long-term trend of dance creation points to *Walking* rather than to *Dolan People*. “Dolan people” themselves cannot stop “walking” in the end and will gradually drift away from the original style. What’s more, the original cultural value of the *Dolan People* in the less developed areas is recognized not by itself but by the

developed economic and cultural centers. The emergence of the original ecological fashion in national folk dances comes from our reflection and review in the process of rapid cultural development. Therefore, we must establish a different evaluation system for “original ecology” and “creation” rather than just considering them as two different orientations of choreography.

The pursuit of sensory impact and the return to the original style seem to form the two poles of recent national folk dance choreography. This shows the great tension of this dance creation system at present and its malleability to accommodate such contrasting creative pursuits. However, this also brings us to a new problem facing contemporary national folk dance choreography. That is, as a dance system with a prescribed concept, the excessive differentiation of the two poles should also have a corresponding limited scope rather than unlimited inclusion and expansion. When the contrast between the two poles reaches the limit, if it is not controlled, it will bring chaos. A phenomenon that directly reflects this in reality is the blurring of the line defining national folk dance choreography and the confusion between commercial and artistic evaluation criteria. We have seen many works casually exchanging the look of “contemporary dance” and “national folk dance,” even to the extent that in dance competitions sometimes people will decide which category to enter a piece based on which is more difficult to win an award. We have also seen the chaotic results when no distinction is made between commercialized entertainment and artistic pursuit onstage. Whether modern or traditional, market or art, excessive separation of the two poles will blur the core value of national folk dance choreography. So, we need to reconceptualize and return to this core value and use different perspectives and systems to distinguish the tendencies of different levels.

In 2002, the work *Going Away* (*Chu zou* 出走) casually fused the traditional vocabulary of Mongol dance with modern dance choreography, causing considerable controversy. This kind of mixing in national folk dance choreography was a common phenomenon at that time, and there are many works that had greater variation and “broke the mold” more than *Going Away*. Here I do not want to judge the categorization and merits of *Going Away*. It’s just that the work itself forms an excellent metaphor for the development of contemporary folk dance creation to the present time: adhering to the home in spirit but in the flesh having no choice but to excitedly leave. We can understand the home of national folk dance choreography to be “tradition,” and we can also understand it to be “art.” Then, the departure to the “modern” and the “commercial market” is filled with stimulation as well as

helplessness. When the earth where traditional Chinese national folk dance lives is eroded by steel and concrete and glamour, where is the vast land of “dances of the vast land”? The reckless departure is always with a backward glance.

## 2.2. ECOLOGICAL FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE NATIONAL FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY

### 2.2.1. Transformation of the Social Environment

Contemporary Chinese society has experienced huge social upheavals. The transformation of the social environment is a major factor in the later developments of Chinese national folk dance choreography.

#### 2.2.1.1. *Transformation of the Traditional Social Economic Base*

The industrialization of modern Europe and the United States invaded and changed China's economic base and affected China's traditional agrarian culture. After the Opium Wars, China was reduced to a semifeudal and semicolonial society and then underwent a series of radical social changes, turmoil, and struggles, until the dawn of the democratic revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s. Since the establishment of the revolutionary literary and artistic line at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and the Arts, the social environment for the development of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography has continued to undergo several major changes. Among these, changes to the social and economic base are an important aspect.

First of all, during the period when the New Yangge movement and frontier dances were in full swing, Chinese society was actually still in a transitional period of war and turmoil. It was struggling to emerge from a semifeudal and semicolonial society, and the agrarian culture still dominated the culture of the society. The revolutionary struggle led by the Chinese Communist Party was itself a bottom-up revolution, with the strategy of “countryside encircling the cities.” Therefore, this revolutionary culture itself did not emerge from the cities but was inextricably linked to the underlying agrarian culture of the people. When the policy of Yan'an art and literature became clear, the New Yangge movement and frontier dances, which took

national folk dances as their subject, immediately became the typical style of revolutionary literature and art. However, at this time, this style was still mainly simple folk forms or instrumentalized with certain political contents. It was at a relatively elementary level and did not completely escape from the economic environment of the agrarian society.

The second time of change was in the early years of the founding of New China, represented by the transformation of national folk dance into a stage art in the 1950s. After its successful establishment of the people's democratic dictatorship, the Chinese Communist Party began to develop social economy and industry, transformed the traditional agrarian society, and began to build a socialist cultural system. In the reconstruction of this cultural system, besides Chinese traditional opera, national folk dance was the most important and rich dance tradition. Therefore, it occupied a very important position, while also drawing on the experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in processing and recreating folk dance. In terms of the social environment at that time, despite the initial development of socialist economy and industry, China was still an agricultural country for a long period, and the tradition of farming culture was still deep. Therefore, the stage of socioeconomic development then did not have much influence on the tradition of national folk dance, while for the people who had just built a new country, their high revolutionary mood kept the whole culture in an exhilarating fever. In other words, the socioeconomic reality of this period was brewing and starting to change radically in a context of anticipation, and Chinese society became more like an idealized society. In following the "Soviet big brother," looking toward the future through revolutionary ideals, and praising new life, canonized national folk dances, in their traditional form, blossomed with a fiery charm and began to rise up from the folk level. Artists who walked with the people showed great love for China's traditional national folk dances and rescued, protected, and developed them extensively. However, when the ideology of the revolution became extreme, the culture of the society supported by the feverish ideals quickly turned authoritarian in the subsequent Cultural Revolution.

The third time was after the end of the Cultural Revolution, and after a short period of adjustment, the reform and opening up of China in the 1980s and 1990s led to rapid socioeconomic development and the rapid transformation of the traditional agrarian society into a modern industrial society. This change in economic base led to a change in culture, and China was rapidly transformed from a revolutionary idealized society to an economi-

cally realistic one. The sweeping socioeconomic changes that took place in China over the past more than twenty years had a tremendous impact on the external environment of national folk dance. On the one hand, the opening of the country's doors allowed foreign cultures that were previously kept out to enter in a relatively strong way. On the other hand, the development of the commodity economy caused a violent impact on the arts.

Thus, from the perspective of the socioeconomic base, the whole development process of China is a gradual transformation from traditional agrarian society to modern industrial society. This transformation from slow to rapid has had enormous impact on Chinese national folk dance choreography. Especially after the reform and opening up, with the rapid development of China's society and economy, this change has entered a period of rapid transformation and is still in progress. This is a huge change in the living environment of Chinese national folk dances, which were born in the soil of agrarian culture. Many original folk dances that are naturally passed down are facing severe social selection and natural elimination. The "traditionality" of Chinese national folk dances is being squeezed and eroded by the radical "modernity." On the one hand, we are anxious about the decline of "tradition," but on the other hand, we cannot clearly know how the traditional dance style reflects and fits into "modernity." It is also important to note that this evolution of Chinese society is extremely uneven. There is a huge gap between the spiritual crisis facing the arts in highly developed economic regions and the material crisis in less developed regions. What is even more serious is that after the 1980s, China's social development, centered on economic construction, turned the whole society extremely pragmatic. The construction of spiritual civilization has not fully kept up with the construction of material civilization, leaving a spiritual void. The commercialization of art and the concept of consumption triggered by the market economy in the new era have caused the canonical and spiritual values of traditional dance art to suffer unprecedented neglect and disregard, and the cultural value judgment has lost its support base. Therefore, on the one hand, from the whole timeline, the contradiction is highlighted between the traditionality of national folk dance and the modernity of social development. On the other hand, from the whole spatial layout, the contradiction is highlighted between the traditionality of national folk dance in underdeveloped areas and the modernity of national folk dance in developed areas. These are two manifestations of the break in cultural temporalities.

We often refer to such a social development process as "leapfrogging"



development, which graphically describes the temporal break. Our culture is also a leapfrogging development, and for national folk dance choreography, we must devote ourselves to the artistic expression of the present. However, due to the gap between traditional agrarian culture and modern industrial civilization in the process of social development, traditional national folk dances, despite their traditional aesthetic cultural values, are not sufficient to fully take on the needs of artistic expression in the new era. On the other hand, the Western modern dance art introduced into China is not naturally formed in the process of China's own industrialization, so it is to some extent detached from China's traditional aesthetic habits and mentalities. For example, the unconventionality and nudity in expression in some modern dances contradict the reserved and moderate style of traditional Chinese dance art, and they are rejected to a certain extent. With the lack of modern vocabulary in the creation of dance art, along with the attachment to traditional culture, the combination of the two needs has induced the remolding of traditional national folk dance vocabulary. In other words, traditional national folk dance is trying hard to "leap over" the temporal break in its creation to catch up with the modern situation. Just as modern technology needs to learn from foreign advanced technology, our cultural catching up has also been heavily influenced by foreign culture. Of course, the gradual development of culture and economic leapfrogging are not exactly synchronized. This is especially because the development of culture is not a linear accumulation but a spiral sedimentation. Even a "reincarnation" or "revival" will occur at the right time in history. This reminds us that in the cultural "leap," we cannot lightly deny and discard the value of the self.

*2.2.1.2. The Tide of China's Entry into Globalization during Reform and Opening Up*

The process of China's integration into globalization is actually a process of facing foreign cultural influences. At the end of its feudal society, China was forced by gunpoint to open its closed doors and gradually began to be influenced by foreign cultures. Therefore, for China, the influence of foreign culture was oppressive from the very beginning, confronting the relatively backward Chinese society against the backdrop of a more advanced social process. China felt a profound social development gap in the face of foreign culture. Therefore, after the founding of New China, in the process of rebuilding our own cultural system, we began to consciously try to combine foreign culture with our own. The term "integration" became one of the most

important words in the Chinese cultural system, and almost all traditional culture needed to be “integrated.” The canonical traditional Chinese medicine needed to be “Chinese and Western medicine in integration,” and similarly, traditional Chinese dance culture also needed to be “integrated.” Compared with the inevitable and irreversible “integration” itself, what we should pay more attention to is the manner and connotation of this “integration.” In particular, the “combination” of culture and art is not a simple addition, like not matching the top of a Western suit with loose-legged pants. It should be a “fusion” after deep understanding and digestion. This is a rather long process, and Chinese national folk dance choreography is also in such a process.

As mentioned above, in the process of rebuilding the dance culture system after the founding of New China, it was deeply influenced by the Soviet and Eastern European models. The basic dance models that were introduced as advanced socialist culture were classical ballet and character dance, as well as the canonization of folk dance through refinement and reworking. At that time, the classical dance of the upper class in China survived in the form of Chinese traditional opera, which obviously differed greatly from the abstract and pure movement system of classical ballet and the independent performance mode of large-scale dance drama. Thus, China’s contemporary classical dance began a massive reconstruction on the foundation of Chinese opera and the framework of ballet. This was a traumatic and unprecedented initiative, which obviously cannot be accomplished in a short period of time. For national folk dance, however, there is an incomparably rich tradition that is readily available, and when combined with the Soviet Union’s and Eastern Europe’s experience in the transformation of character dance and the canonization of folk dance through reworking, it is a smooth process in terms of feasibility and operability. Moreover, this canonization itself is based on the premise of respecting the characteristics of national traditions. The aesthetic enhancement of national folk dance did not cause great damage to tradition but distilled the exquisite aesthetic qualities. Therefore, although national folk dance was relatively subordinate in the whole dance system at the beginning, onstage in the 1950s was the most active and exciting national folk dance choreography. It not only created exquisite stage art but also maintained strong national folk characteristics.

This cultural influence, although relatively homogeneous and limited at the time, laid the roots of the “integration path” in the development of national folk dance. Since then, the cultural influences that China has faced in the process of globalization have intensified in both breadth and depth,

and the “integration” itself has become more complex. After the 1980s, China’s reform and opening-up policy decisively opened its doors to the international community in a new and rapid manner. At the same time, this exposed China’s traditional culture to the increasing impact and assault of globalization. Regarding the globalization of culture, in fact, “modernity,” which originated in Europe, has become a norm along with the expansion of culture. It has increasingly influenced the development of the various countries and cultures in the world, resulting in the dangerous tendency of obliterating the value of differences between cultures. In the contemporary process, Chinese national folk dance choreography has been influenced by Western dance culture. To a certain extent, it has neglected and deviated from its own cultural values, which is obviously one of the symptoms of this tendency.

Both economic and cultural globalization are, in fact, deeply related to the development of modern technology. When technology was not as advanced as it is today, we could see that the mutual exchange and influence between cultures was limited. In the case of folk dances, it is mainly the mutual influence between neighboring regions, with certain similarity in form. Therefore, for a long time, the characteristics of national folk dances were largely regional cultural characteristic—the cultural characteristics of a certain ethnic group’s place of residence. The farther the spatial distance of the regions, the weaker the mutual influence between cultures and the greater the difference of stylistic characteristics. However, with the rapid development of science and technology, especially the revolutions in transportation and communication, the limit of spatial distance on cultural influence has almost been broken. Today, the influence between cultures has gone far beyond the limits of geography and has entered a profound field. At the same time, the temporal limits of intercultural influence have also been broken. In line with the development of science and technology, the development of culture has also been greatly accelerated, mainly because the progress of interpenetration and mutual learning between different cultures has been accelerated. This makes the growth and change of culture also greatly accelerated. Moreover, the mutual influence between national folk dances is no longer just a confusion and imitation in form. More importantly, it is the mutual penetration and influence of cultural concepts, forming an impact at the level of fundamental ideas. Therefore, the globalization of culture that accompanies the globalization of economy is not the same as the historical influence of culture in terms of possibility and degree of realization. Com-

pared with the influence and exchange between different cultures in history, we can definitely see a kind of “accelerated” development. That is, the closer the time is to the present, the more profound and rapid the influence between cultures is. Faced with such a comprehensive and violent cultural influence, the path of “integration” for national folk dance choreography is no longer as simple as it was in the 1950s. More variations are taking place not only in form but also in concepts of creation. However, the roots of China’s long-standing traditional culture have always made the integration of different cultures difficult in the face of resistance. Along with cultural globalization is the call for cultural diversity, because the unique value of culture can always be found in diversity. Therefore, just like other traditional cultures, “integration” makes the creation and development of Chinese national folk dance also entangled by the proposition of East and West, nation and world. Internal persistence and external assault make the creation of contemporary Chinese national folk dance into a complex “cultural mixture.”

Of course, it is not only today’s national folk dance choreography that faces the influence of different cultures. The dance experiences and creations of the early dance pioneers Dai Ailian and Jia Zuoguang, in a sense, also reflect the element of “cultural mixing.” They both experienced the influence of Western dance culture in their early dance education. Of course, the ingredients of “cultural mixing” are different from one period to another. The influence of Western dance culture that Dai Ailian and Jia Zuoguang experienced was more of a German early expressionist modern dance, which adhered to the German philosophical tradition and the introspective qualities produced during the war. It was relatively easy to find spiritual commonality with different cultures. In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese dance was greatly influenced by the impact of modern dance and postmodern dance, mainly from the United States. Under the free and open cultural system of the United States and the highly developed industrial society, American modern and postmodern dance advocated a complete breakthrough and creation of individuality. This kind of diversified and open cultural concept has seriously impacted our closed traditional cultural system. However, what we should see in Dai Ailian and Jia Zuoguang is their unparalleled devotion to national folk dance culture, and thus their firm commitment to the subjectivity of national folk dance tradition. In particular, Jia Zuoguang’s life experience in the grassland pastoral area made the cultural “mixture” finally become a “fusion.” Due to the great adherence to their own dance tradition and culture, their dance shows a strong self-vitality rather than the idea of

becoming a “parasite” in the process of mixing. However, what many of the younger generation apparently lack is respect and admiration for traditional culture. Without subjectivity, they are easily lost in the conflicts between multiple cultures.

China is not the only country to experience this in the context of globalization. The development of economic globalization has made different cultural types unavoidable, and every culture involved has become a hybrid. For the cultural mixture of Chinese national folk dance creation, the crisis is that the concepts of “modern and traditional” are imperceptibly substituted by the concepts of “Western and Chinese.” The culture of developed countries has become the representative of “modernity,” which is ahead in time, while our own traditional culture has become the representative of “tradition,” which is relatively backward. We not only chase Western “modernity” when crossing the break in cultural temporalities but also unconsciously and willingly become the marginal culture of Western cultural centrism and the object of its judgment. This has caused us to lose the core values of our own culture in the midst of “integration” and to neglect our own “modernity” that we should have. This crisis was actually hidden in the cultural mixture when it was formed, because modern culture did not develop naturally within China’s own cultural system but rather was forced to respond to the impact of modern Western civilization. The openness to the outside world and the forced response have caused the development of Chinese traditional culture to be disordered in space and time. It deviated from its own development logic and constantly adjusted its development trajectory under the influence of various complex factors. It even fell into the confusion of losing sight of one another at times. For national folk dance choreography, at the beginning of the reconstruction of the dance culture system after the founding of New China, it was already influenced to a certain extent by Western character dance and the artistic staging of folk dance. After the reform and opening up, it was deeply influenced by the choreographic techniques and concepts of Western modern dance. Under the influence of Western culture, we have an internal desire to move toward modernity. But, at the same time, we are often caught in an attachment to traditional culture that we cannot let go of. This reminds us that the cultural mixture of Chinese national folk dance choreography was quite passive in its formation and development. Thus, it was easy to lose the continuity with tradition and the subjectivity of self. When many people look at traditional culture, they often subconsciously think of it and judge it from the perspective of Western culture. Even our

present reflections on globalization and modernity are full of Western cultural perspectives and colors. However, we cannot retreat into traditional culture, because the human experience and spiritual value system that accumulated during China's long historical development have lost the continuity of humanistic spirit in the huge leap into modern times. This state of constantly moving forward in reflection and constantly wandering and swaying while reflecting has always accompanied the development of Chinese national folk dance choreography.

In the traditional development of Western culture, there are also many cultural hybrids. Some traditional Western dance styles will be fused with different elements in the stage performance. For example, Spanish flamenco dance absorbs elements of jazz, Argentine tango absorbs elements of ballet, and so on. However, such cultural mixing is mainly carried out within the Western cultural system and its own development track. It is a natural extension of its own cultural foundation. The postmodern reflection on modernity, such as globalization and other topics, is also a conscious act of self-development of Western culture. This is not the same as the modernization and globalization environment that traditional Chinese culture faces, which is intertwined with the outside and inside. And there is a problem of strong and weak culture. Of course, the strong and weak cultures here do not refer to the value of culture itself, as each culture has its own life and value and there is no difference between strong and weak. However, different cultural systems have stronger or weaker influence based on their socioeconomic and development level. The Western cultural system, with the support of a developed social economy, obviously has a stronger influence. In the process of canonization and modernization, Chinese national folk dance choreography will inevitably be affected by this influence. In fact, we can see the difference between strength and weakness just in the mentality of facing foreign culture. Our alertness to foreign culture and our reflection on our own culture are both born out of a mentality of weakness. The great cultural exchanges between Central Plains culture and that of the Western Regions that took place during China's Tang Dynasty are a historical example often cited by people who hold the theory of cultural openness. However, the Tang Dynasty was the peak of China's feudal society, and its culture had a strong influence supported by a strong state power. This is why it accepted and absorbed the music and dance from Central Asia with a confident and open mind.

The tide of globalization is a fierce baptism for China's traditional

culture. We can see that as China's economy rises rapidly in the midst of opening up, cultural confidence is also rising. The development of Chinese national folk dance choreography will also find its way in this strengthening of confidence.

## 2.2.2. Traditional Cultural Thought

### 2.2.2.1. *The Inheritance and Development View of Chinese Tradition*

China's traditional cultural thought has an important concept known as the "Doctrine of the Mean" (*Zhongyong zhi dao* 中庸之道). As the orthodoxy that has influenced Chinese thought for thousands of years, Confucian thought is full of the wisdom of the mean. In a sense, Confucian thought is a kind of thinking of the mean. The mean is an important methodology in Confucian thought, and the mean is also one of the most important categories in Confucian thought. In Chen Kehua's 陈科华 discussion of the Doctrine of the Mean, three points deserve special attention:

This association of the concept of the "middle course" (*zhong* 中) with politics means that the development of the concept of the "middle course" in traditional Chinese culture has taken an ideological path from the very beginning, with a strong color of political discourse. . . .

Confucius's so-called time-specific middle course (*shizhong* 时中) means that there are different middle courses at different times, one middle course per time, rather than an unchanging "middle course" that exists in all "times." The spiritual substance of "time-specific middle course" is not to respond to all changes with no change but to change and go forward together with the times. . . .

Although Confucius's Doctrine of the Mean has "time-specific middle course" as its main orientation, the flexibility of dealing with the world is premised on principle. . . . Without principle, there is no flexibility, and the two are mutually conditional and indispensable.<sup>84</sup>

The connection between "middle course" and politics is due to the fact that the concept of the "middle course" has been closely associated with the political sphere from the very beginning. This makes it an officially dominant political concept that radiated widely into the society in the traditional authoritarian social structure of China, where imperial power was

supreme. However, the connotations of the “middle course” in relation to politics are also continuously evolving. For example, “ritual,” as an external code of etiquette, also requires the internal cultivation of “benevolence” and cooperation and adaptation toward the external objective “time.” Why did the “collapse of rites and music” occur at the end of the Zhou Dynasty? It is precisely because, on the one hand, people who observed rituals did not have enough inner cultivation and thus lacked the self-consciousness to maintain the rituals. On the other hand, “ritual” as a stable normative system tends to fall into rigidity, so the ritual keepers should be allowed to make certain adaptations according to the special situation, that is, “time.” However, such flexible adaptations must be based on the premise that they do not infringe on the core values of rituals and that they must “do something and also not do something.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, in Chen’s words, “the spiritual substance of the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean lies in the ‘time-specific middle course’ of ‘refusing to compromise.’”<sup>86</sup> Confucius’s so-called Doctrine of the Mean is not just a discourse of ideas but has become the Chinese way of dealing with the world—for example, being impartial, being neither subservient nor arrogant, and having a soft exterior and hard interior. In short, the Doctrine of the Mean is the way of being neutral, not biased, and of everyday feasibility. It is widely permeated in the lives of Chinese people and has profoundly influenced their lives, becoming the guiding principle of social, political, economic, and cultural life.

We can also understand the Doctrine of the Mean as a rational and flexible means of control. No situation has rigid limits, but also it doesn’t allow development to extremes, instead always maintaining a middle condition. In literature and art concepts, “joy without obscenity, grief without injury” is a typical doctrine of the mean of using reason to control emotions in a moderate condition. The traditional Chinese concept of inheritance and development is an important concept in our development of traditional dance art, and this concept is also a typical example of the doctrine of the mean. The “inheritance and development view” (*jicheng yu fazhan guan* 继承与发展观) is an official view of the development of culture and art that gives a certain degree of flexibility to development but also establishes artistic principles that cannot be exceeded. Inheritance does not mean unchanging fixity, and development is not detaching from tradition. Development is always development based on inheritance, and inheritance is always inheritance with development. The concept of inheritance and development precisely requires a balance between inheritance and development, forming an effec-



tive and controllable means of gradual advancement. We can also interpret this as typical reformism and eclecticism. That is, development is a moderate change, not a radical revolution; it is a revision with damage control (loss and gain), not breaking something in accordance with the idea that there is no construction without destruction. The radical development of the modern art movement in the West after classical art is more revolutionary, using a reverse method to strongly question and mock tradition and deconstructing the old cultural system by means of destruction. This is obviously different from the Chinese concept of inheritance and development. The two-sided nature of the inheritance-development concept makes Chinese national folk dance choreography an evolving, rather than a rigid, system; it also becomes a system that always maintains the roots of tradition. Of course, the essence of the concept of inheritance and development is dynamic rather than static, but it only sets a scale to control the development. The scale itself is vague and flexible. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp in practice, often rendering judgments invalid and far from being able to quell controversies. In fact, reformism includes the improvement of oneself, and compromise also includes the compromise of oneself, which itself has a degree of mobility. Looking back at the development of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography, the debate on the question of the scale of inheritance and development has never stopped. However, there is no controversy about the “inheritance and development view” itself. And although the debate has not stopped, the pace of keeping up with the times has also never stopped because of the debate.

For Chinese national folk dance choreography, in the inheritance part of the view of inheritance and development, we can also see that traditional Chinese culture is concerned more about the group than the individual. Of course, this does not mean that Chinese traditional culture lacks care for people; in fact, on the contrary, Chinese traditional culture has a unique humanistic spirit. However, the “human” (*ren* 人) in Chinese traditional culture is often associated with “heaven” (*tian* 天), or, rather, we are very concerned about the relationship and connection between the two. In traditional Chinese culture, there is the Way of Heaven, which refers to the origin of heaven and earth and their laws; there is also the Way of Humans, which refers to the reasoning of humans themselves and human society. The Way of Heaven and the Way of Humans are consistent, which is often referred to as “the unity of heaven and humans” (*tian ren heyi* 天人合一). However, in the pursuit of this unity, the Way of Heaven is higher than the

Way of Humans. That is, humans should follow the example of heaven and seek the unity of heaven and humanity, and the Way of Humanity should be in accordance with the Way of Heaven and the laws of nature. Under the influence of this way of thinking, the individual in traditional Chinese culture is often described as a tiny drop in the ocean, a tiny part of the whole of nature and society, and often needs to sacrifice itself for the larger structure. That is why Chinese culture has always been collectivist, with the collective of the nation and the state always taking precedence over the individual. Chinese national folk dance is precisely a group culture, owned by the “dance body” as a whole group of people. So, the destruction of the national folk dance tradition becomes the destruction of the values and interests of the group by the individual. In criticism on national folk dance choreography, the issue of “community identity” (*zuqun rentong* 族群认同) has been repeatedly emphasized. This is obviously a departure from Western modern art’s strong emphasis on individual creativity. Of course, this does not mean that national folk dance choreography completely eliminates the expression of individuality. In fact, it includes a problem of the “big self” and the “small self.” The “small self” is individual creation, while the “big self” is the cultural specificity accumulated and possessed by the national folk dance group. The realization of the value of the “small self” of individuality is actually included in the value of the “big self,” and the two are not in conflict. In other words, Chinese culture appreciates the relative differences within the “Great Harmony” rather than the absolute differences of each individual. Jia Zuoguang’s pioneering contribution to Mongol folk dance is a typical example of the promotion of individuality within the “Great Harmony.”

#### *2.2.2.2. The Openness of Traditional Chinese Culture*

The flexibility and pragmatism of the Doctrine of the Mean also create an openness in traditional Chinese culture. China is a multiethnic country, and in its long history, there has always been contact and integration between different cultures. This openness was demonstrated by the great cultural fusion between the north and the south in the Yangtze River and Yellow River basins in the Han Dynasty and by the great cultural fusion between the Central Plains and the Western Regions in the Tang Dynasty. China’s openness in dealing with foreign cultures is actually an extension of the historical concept of inheritance and development. By “absorbing the cr me and expelling the chaff,” we emphasize that the subject can take and leave cultural traditions according to the changing times and situations. Unlike

the linear accumulation of knowledge, culture is often reincarnated. The experiences and lessons of culture are often relative to a particular time and space. What is considered “crème” in a particular historical time may be the “chaff” in another historical time. In this way, with the emphasis on subjectivity and variability, we can grasp the experience and lessons of cultural flexibly. Mao Zedong’s maxim “Let the past serve the present and let the foreign serve China” introduces this concept of cultural learning into the conditions for treating both historical and foreign cultures. The “crème” and “chaff” of foreign culture are also that which the subject can flexibly take or leave.

Therefore, the long-standing Chinese civilization has a deep humanistic foundation that maintains its flowing water until today. China’s traditional culture has never been conservative and has never been afraid of diversity. Historically, the national folk dance culture has also had such a tradition, and the music and dance arts of different ethnic groups have been in frequent exchange and of mutual influence. The music and dances of the Western Regions were popular at the Chinese court, the Mongol folk dances left their mark on Chinese classical opera, and the images of music and dance in the Dunhuang caves had a Central Plains cultural flavor in a foreign setting. Therefore, we can see a huge cultural influence of this breaking of the limits of geography today. Contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography, despite all the changes in tradition, is able to generate new vitality through the intermingling of different cultures. The fact that contemporary China has been able to implement the national policy of reform and opening up, to resolutely join the World Trade Organization to experience the wave of economic globalization, and to face foreign cultures with an open attitude shows not only great courage but also the profound stamina of traditional culture.

Therefore, we can see that it is with such a flexible and pragmatic “subjectivity” that Chinese national folk dance occupies a superior position in the contemporary progress of dance in China. We have not formed a development model in which the preservation of original folk dance is the tradition, while the dissemination and development of Western modern dance make up the main body of the modernization process. On the contrary, Chinese traditional dances, including national folk dances, are undergoing an interactive and innovative process of self-evolution with the support of stage creation. The modern condition of Chinese national folk dance choreography fully reflects the inclusive character of Chinese civilization. The modernized Chinese national folk dance tries its best to catch up with the modern temporality while trying to maintain its identity and right to dialogue.

What we need to pay attention to is that, whether “Let the past serve the present” or “Let the foreign serve China,” the essence of both is “for my use.” Here, “my” (that is, “I”) represents subjectivity and has the decisive factor. The key to the greatest confusion in the new era is the question, Who is this “I”? Who is this subject? Chinese traditional culture is not only “pluralistic.” More importantly, it emphasizes “unity of pluralism,” and this “unity” is the unchanging subjectivity. During the period of feudal cultural dictatorship, the subject of this “unity” was more the ruling class, the cultural orthodoxy established by the ruling class with Han culture as the main subject. In socialist literature and art, we also experienced the cultural dictatorship of the Cultural Revolution, and behind “letting one hundred flowers bloom” there was also a latent dominant principle of literature and art, but one in which the concept of “unification” became “the people.” In a regime where the people are in charge, literature and art emphasize the “art of the people” and must be pleasing to “the people.” However, “the people” is an abstract and broad collective concept, and there is a difference between the majority and the minority. So, there will not be complete unity in the appreciation of art. In the actual art practice, we still have to face each individual. National folk dance choreography itself is the development upon a kind of group cultural style. Under the influence of Western modern art, it will also place greater emphasis on individual creation. At this point, the “I,” that is, the subject, becomes split. Of course, we can continue to say “for my use,” but this “I” may become many “I”s talking to themselves.

### 2.2.3. The System of Contemporary Development

#### 2.2.3.1. *Contemporary Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography in the Professional Field*

Contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography has actually entered the professional field and become the profession of “dance workers.” As part of the cultural and artistic community, dancers are actually part of society’s cultural circle. In the historical development of society, these people who had a deeper mastery of the arts often had a spiritual and cultural advantage, and a common distinction was made between the so-called elite culture and the so-called popular culture. The term “elite culture” often appears as a relative concept to “popular culture.” I do not see elite culture and popular culture as opposites or as two unequal classes. In fact, we should under-

stand them as the possession of culture by different groups under different conditions. In the words of Shao Mujun 邵牧君, the division between the two cultures is “technically determined.” This is because the basic mode of cultural dissemination in the early days was greatly restricted by primitive printing technology, “which could only satisfy the needs of a very small number of people, so culture was destined to develop and grow only among a small number of people, thus forming an elite culture.” The great development of modern technology has led to a revolution in the way culture is disseminated and has empowered a wider range of people to possess culture. This means that, in Shao’s words, “the rapid development of popular culture in this century is not the result of ‘meeting the most instinctive demands of human nature: entertainment,’ but rather the result of the majority of people having the ability to consume cultural products.”<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, on the one hand, as a minority culture, the elite culture actually has an advantage in possessing culture and is able to accumulate and reflect on the experience of culture, thus forming a sense of cultural superiority. On the other hand, as a majority culture, mass culture is limited by many means of cultural transmission, and it can only evolve through natural transmission. The elite culture thus becomes the leading and representative culture. In the case of Chinese national folk dance, the oral mode of transmission has allowed it to evolve naturally as a popular culture at the folk level. However, since ancient times, China’s traditional dance has formed a pattern of collecting dances in the field and turning them into court dances. As the source and foundation of classical dance, folk dance has always accompanied it and transcended the folk cultural level through “being stripped of its vulgarity and made elegant.” This canonized folk dance was mastered by the “professional” artists of the court, appreciated by the upper nobility, and, more importantly, recorded and passed down in the official texts of the elite culture. Thus, it became the “elite culture” of the minority. After the founding of New China, the contemporary Chinese classical dance system has been completely reconstructed into a school of its own, and it no longer has a traditional correspondence with the folk dance that exists as a popular culture. On the contrary, Chinese national folk dance, in a new contemporary process of canonization, has itself redivided into national folk dance as an elite culture and folk dance as a popular culture. The historical pattern has resolutely persisted in the development of Chinese national folk dance. From the naturally transmitted agrarian dance culture to the canonization and diversification of professional teaching and stage choreography, the pro-

fessionalization and elitism of Chinese national folk dance have formed different levels from folk to classroom to stage. At the same time, they have given national folk dance another mode of survival and transmission. Professionalized Chinese national folk dance choreography undoubtedly exists on the level of elite culture, which must go beyond the folk level and pursue profound thinking and value in national folk dance culture. This is done by a subset of professional dancers, and it becomes a culture possessed by them. Meanwhile, the national folk dances that still exist and are passed on among the folk continue to be the culture possessed by the masses.

Therefore, China's contemporary national folk dance choreography that has entered the professional field, whether in terms of the training level of dance bodies or the profundity of artistic ideas, is possessed by a minority of people under these professional conditions and then disseminated to the public. This is different from the folk dance culture that is truly possessed by the public in natural life, because professional dancers refine and rework the national folk dances. On the one hand, the dance form is refined and purified, and the cultural connotation is enhanced. On the other hand, the original and subtle folkloric characteristics are lost. For example, in the pursuit of "broad folk dance," the academy style of national folk dance emphasizes the macro quality of "national/ethnic" and dilutes the micro quality of "folklore." While folk dance has become macro in its refinement, it inevitably leaves out many micro folkloric elements. Dance art that truly exists at the folk level essentially is a kind of micro life art, and this is the price that elite culture needs to pay for pursuing the macro. It is precisely for this reason that Liu Jian suggests that folk dance is not suitable for grand themes: grand themes are biased toward macro propositions in the sense of ethnology and anthropology. This deviates from the micro pleasures of folk dance in the sense of folkloristics.

Comparing the two contexts of folk dance, we must realize that national folk dance choreography that exists as an elite culture should and must be more culturally self-conscious. It must possess the ability not only to sublimate culture but also to reflect on aspects such as cultural positioning and relations. In fact, there is no clear line between the so-called elite culture and popular culture in contemporary times. This is due to the changes in social classes and the changes in technology that have greatly improved the way culture is disseminated and possessed. The public has wide access to national folk dance choreography of professional dancers through performances and videos. The elite culture will be greatly affected by this increased

ability of the public to possess culture. On the one hand, its influence and leadership will be weakened accordingly, and it may even be submerged in the mass culture and lose its former sense of superiority. On the other hand, this overlap in ownership forms a situation in which the two exist within one another. Precisely because of this, contemporary national folk dance choreography is able to compensate for the loss of the continuity of historical development of folk dance as a popular culture among the folk, and in this way it can avoid the crisis of its loss.

The entry of Chinese folk dance choreography into the professional field is actually a rather special phenomenon. In most foreign dance development, folk dance is limited to the folk and mostly stays at the amateur level. It rarely becomes an elite culture with a high tendency toward “professionalization” as in China, and there is no such overlapping concept as “national folk.” Amateur folk dance and professional ballet and modern dance are clearly on two different planes. Many folk dance companies, even when they perform in the theater, maintain a folkloric form of performance and a relaxed atmosphere of self-entertainment. There are, of course, some canonical world folk dances that have developed into very mature theatrical performance art, such as the staged folk dances of the Soviet Union and of Eastern European countries, the Spanish art of flamenco, and the Argentine tango. Although these folk dances are packaged into more elegant and beautiful theatrical performance forms, they still maintain their folk cultural spirit and style. Of course, there are also some performances that have gone more in the direction of modern entertainment. Yet, as soon as they break away from the traditional cultural layer of folk dance, they will no longer be called folk dance. For example, the Irish step dance *Riverdance* actually retains a strong aesthetic character of Irish folk dance, but it is not defined as a folk dance. There is still quite a big gap between this and the artistic creation of theater that Chinese national folk dance pursues. Not only does our national folk dance choreography aim to show the culture and style of folk dance. It also moves toward a broader and more professional field—using folk dance materials to carry out expression beyond folk culture. For example, a folk dance like *Yellow Earth Yellow* has already gone far beyond the concept of “folk.” The sentimental attachment to and reflection on the land is not something that can arise from local folklore. In many of our folk dance creations, folk dance has become a means of very broad artistic expression. In the West, some modern stage arts also use many elements of folk dance, including modern dance creation. How-

ever, they are not conceptually defined as folk dance, nor are they restricted in their creation as a result of these categories.

Thus, the professionalization of Chinese folk dance has created a bit of “confusion” in this dance genre. In retrospect, the so-called classical dances in history were always built on the basis of folk dances. In particular, the professional dancers represented by the court dancers organized and innovated the dances from folklore to form a more standardized and aestheticized court dance. This process is surprisingly similar to the work of our professional national folk dancers today. Aren’t we also a group of professional dancers who have been processing, organizing, and recreating folk dances? The difference is that we are creating for the people, not for the emperors, generals, and ministers. In fact, the name “folk dance” is different from the temporal concept of “classical dance.” It is a social-level concept, referring to the dance located at the level of “folk.” However, our national folk dance is obviously not located at the simple “folk” level. From this point, we can see that Chinese national folk dance that has entered the professional field cannot be placed on par with original folk dance in the essential sense. Its own status determines that the two cannot be equated. Although the names are similar, the connotations are not the same.

#### *2.2.3.2. Construction of the Professional Training System of Contemporary Chinese National Folk Dance*

After the founding of New China, the traditional Chinese dance teaching and training system was initially reconstructed as a comprehensive system for Chinese dance, with Chinese national folk dance and Chinese classical dance existing together as different courses in one training system. However, the separation of the disciplines of Chinese national folk dance and Chinese classical dance has allowed the teaching and training system of Chinese national folk dance to take a path of independent development and has achieved great success. Since there is no problem of historical discontinuity, the development of this system has become the most powerful continuation of Chinese dance culture and tradition. Contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography has been profoundly influenced by the professional training system. This influence was more hidden at the beginning but gradually became more evident and intense in the subsequent development. Since it is part of the process of teaching and training related to stage creation, we must give it separate analysis.



Nowadays, we are very accustomed to saying that the creation of a certain national folk dance has borrowed the choreographic techniques of modern dance. Yet, in fact, not many people can say exactly which techniques being used belong to modern dance. Often it is just a feeling that it is different from traditional dance. National folk dance has a lot of restrictions in the creation techniques precisely because it carries “tradition,” and when such restrictions are broken under the influence of concepts from Western modern dance, people seem to feel threatened by Western modern dance. However, what modern dance has really done is just to open a gap. What emerges from this gap is the long-accumulated development potential of Chinese dance itself. The eruption of this potential is closely related to the long-established training model of our dance industry. We can look at the Beijing Dance Academy, the highest institution of higher learning in China for dance education, as an example. Its teaching and creation have long extended nationwide and are quite representative.

As mentioned earlier, because of the high degree of professionalization in Chinese national folk dance education, the concept of simple folk dance must be complicated into three levels: original ecology folk dance, folk dance in teaching, and folk dance for the stage. Nowadays, the national folk dances onstage are rarely unchanged original ecology folk dances. Almost all of them have been refined and integrated by the folk dances in the form of teaching. This is called “academy-style” national folk dance. It is a kind of sublimation on the basis of the original folk dance. In the Beijing Dance Academy’s national folk dance program, the “elemental teaching method” (*yuansu jiaoxuefa* 元素教学法) and the “three qualities principle” (*sanxing yuanze* 三性原则) have already become a set of effective training systems.

The so-called elemental teaching method is a crucial part in the construction of academy-style folk dance—that is, in the words of Pan Zhitao and Zhao Tiechun, “the process of decomposing, fracturing, and synthesizing the movement elements one by one. This forms the elemental rhythm that conforms to the cultural trajectory. It reflects the cultural direction of reconstruction and purifies the elemental principles of folk dance dynamics.”<sup>88</sup> From this description, we can see that academy-style national folk dance actually dismantles the rough original ecology folk dance, distills the elements and their principles, and then reconstructs it. In this way, it creates a dance form that originates from the folk but is higher than the folk. Although the objects and results are different, this is similar to the method of extracting the elements of Chinese traditional opera to create the body

rhyme system in Chinese classical dance. Between the deconstruction and reconstruction of folk dance elements, the rustic original ecology folk movements were beautified and the style was strengthened. At the same time, the variation in form is also inevitable. This is like building blocks. The overall form of the blocks is deconstructed into its component parts and then reconstructed again with refined and selected parts. It is impossible to maintain the overall form even if it is reconstructed according to the original form. Moreover, this variation of elements tends to cut off the concrete connection between the movements and their original meanings. For example, the teacher may only tell you how to do the movements, where to position your hands, how to move your feet, how to twist your body, and so forth. They will rarely tell you the meaning behind the movements. It is only in the process of reconstruction that the academy-style national folk dance emphasizes the need to accord with the root of Chinese cultural spirit. This is so that the reconstructed dance form can still remain within the large cultural circle with a sense of identity. However, this approach itself has left a channel for the “modernization” of Chinese national folk dance. This is because the “degree” of variation caused by the reconstruction of elements is difficult to grasp and it is easy to fall into the embarrassment of “fifty steps laughing at a hundred steps.” Gao Du obviously caused controversy because he went a bit further. The “movement analysis” course he once offered dismantled and reconstructed the elements of folk dance more thoroughly. The purpose, according to Gao, was that “simply teaching techniques and dance works can no longer fully realize the educational function of dance. We need to cultivate creative talents in all aspects and focus on quality education. . . . We advocate developing the expressive capacity of folk dance on the basis of original environment folk dance in order to expand its social function and professional nature.”<sup>89</sup> In the article “Impressions of Chinese Folk Dance ‘Movement Analysis,’” Pu Hui 普慧 described the specific methods in the movement analysis class:

- (1) Ask students to imitate a traditional folk dance movement with a specified duration; (2) without changing its form, condense or extend the duration of this movement; (3) analyze the composition of the original movement and change the rhythm of the parts that are suitable for change, then arrange it into multiple spatial levels to achieve a vocabulary with multiple possibilities; (4) use the vocabulary with multiple possibilities to reassemble the parts of the original vocabularies in different

ways, break them up and recombine them, thus forming a rich vocabulary with rich rhythm, variety, and with a strong sense of spatial layering.

As we can see, “movement analysis” is mainly about the possibility of acquiring a new vocabulary through the adjustment and change of time and space. It is mainly carried out for choreographic purposes. The change to traditional national folk dance movements by “movement analysis” is obvious, and the traditional cultural context is separated from the external movement system. It should be noted that the movement analysis course, as a basic composition course, takes creation and development as its task. There are two other courses that go along with it in the curriculum. One is the original ecology folk dance course, which emphasizes the study of folkloric dance culture. The other is the basic course in Chinese folk dance, which is the original Han, Tibetan, Mongol, Uyghur, and Korean Beijing Dance Academy teaching system. The three courses form a triangle, each taking on a different role and task. Gao Du emphasizes again and again that a true grasp of the origin, emotion, form, style, and dynamics of traditional national folk dance movements is the prerequisite for “movement analysis,” which is not a modern choreographic technique without constraints. Gao explains, “This way of re-presenting movement style should be based on the original material and the originality of things, and through the analysis of movement experience, it should gain the ability to reproduce appropriately. It should be a prerequisite that what comes out of this experience of analysis should not obscure its authenticity and style.”<sup>90</sup> In Gao Du’s stage choreography such as *A Green Leaf* and *Reading Butterfly Lovers* (*Du Liang Zhu* 读梁祝), we can see the potential for all new reproduction and artistic expression of national folk dance brought by “movement analysis.” This is the possibility of “modernization” brought by the deconstruction and reconstruction of elements.

The so-called three qualities principle refers to the representativeness, systematization, and training potential that national folk dance should possess. This corresponds to the three transformations of Chinese national folk dance, as explained by Yu Ping:

The first transformation is the separation of the movement dynamics style from its cultural milieu. This makes it become a pure human movement form placed in the midst of many different pure human movement forms. . . . The second transformation is the sorting out of the logical relations of its movement dynamics style. This order of arrangement is not

based on the conventions of mental acceptance but on the adaptation to physiological movement. . . . The third transformation is that it should not only allow the person in training to master a certain movement dynamics style. It should also become an effective means of training bodily movement.<sup>91</sup>

As we can see, the first transformation strengthens and highlights the movement style of national folk dance, so that it has the representation of a certain national style. The second transformation makes the movement logic of national folk dance conform to the body's laws of movement, forming the systematicity of movement teaching. The third transformation makes the movement teaching of national folk dance have value for training the body. The "three qualities principle" focuses on the teaching system of movement, which inevitably loses a certain cultural content. The deviation of this system in the canonization process of folk dance has also caused controversy. When the content of traditional dance is separated from the form, although the style of movement is strengthened and the national characteristics are enhanced, the form of movement loses its original meaning. It becomes an empty shell and is reduced to a fragmentary tradition of dance culture, such that "this" is no longer "that."

In fact, apart from the training system of Chinese national folk dance itself, the training of Chinese dance choreographers has also influenced the creation of Chinese national folk dance. The Choreography Department of the Beijing Dance Academy is a separate department, and Chinese dance choreography is offered as an independent major. This has exerted considerable influence on the creation of dance throughout the country. Although the choreography major is divided into Chinese dance choreography and modern dance choreography, the division of choreography into dance genres is not clear-cut, and Chinese dance choreography is not subdivided into Chinese classical dance and Chinese national folk dance. Because of the separation of composition from training in traditional dance genres, creation actually loses its close connection to traditional dance genres. As a result, the Chinese dance choreographers at the Beijing Dance Academy do not seem to care much about experiencing and safeguarding traditional dance genres. Their interest and attention lie more in the intense study of choreographic techniques. The early years of the choreography major were more influenced by the Soviet expert ballet choreographers, and later the curriculum of the Choreography Department was mainly based on the foundation

of Western modern choreography grounded in the Simon technique system. When the wave of Western modern dance thinking opened the door of technique completely, many people were overwhelmed by it. Because they were so eager to explore at the level of movement, how many of them would seriously consider the cultural heritage of traditional dance and the issue of inheritance? The deeper one plays with the technique, the greater the possibility of traditional dance being “modernized.” To be more accurate, when one lacks a profound grasp of traditional dance genres, playing with techniques is very “dangerous.”

Zhang Yujun’s 张羽军 course Movement Deconstruction is a typical example worth exploring, although it is not directly related to national folk dance. This course pushed the deconstruction and reconstruction of movement elements to the extreme, and as far as “movement deconstruction” is concerned, it actually already entered into a very deep level of language. Deconstruction is a kind of microscopic analysis after dismantling. It has at least two very important points of significance: one is to study the laws of dance language such as time, space, and force in greater depth; the second is to break away from the shackles of customary structure to explore more ways of structuring dance language. As mentioned earlier, deconstruction is actually a kind of microanalysis, so the focus of deconstruction is also on the elemental level. When the movement is broken down into subtle elements, the elemental forms that are hidden under the overall form will be exposed, and new possibilities of structural forms will emerge. Just like building blocks, the same elements can be structured in completely different forms. Therefore, the real meaning and purpose of “deconstruction” is precisely “reconstruction.” In this way, ensnared by the enjoyment of reconstruction and technique, the choreographers not only destroy the structure and form of traditional dance but also create new “modernized” forms. The problem is that while Zhang Yujun’s own profound grasp of classical dance supports his ability to “reconstruct” on a higher level after he has “deconstructed,” those who lack a traditional dance foundation after “deconstructing” will be unable to “reconstruct.” When the original block structure is lost, the new building blocks become a messy “pile.” Many choreographers in precisely this kind of creation get further and further away. After all, the deconstruction and reconstruction of elements at the level of movement are more suitable for this society eager for quick success and rapid development. How many people can be like Sun Ying 孙颖, patiently spending decades with vast amounts of cultural and historical materials to excavate and organize traditional Chi-

nese music and dance forms? An interesting phenomenon is that, although the major is in general Chinese dance choreography, the students trained in this major are almost all inclined to the creation of “modernized” Chinese classical dances and few of them are deeply involved in the field of national folk dance choreography. This shows precisely that a lack of national folk dance vocabulary cannot be compensated through choreographic technique.

As discussed in the morphological analysis section of Zi Huayun’s *Choreoecology*, the pure external form can no doubt determine the special characteristics of the form through “factor decomposition” and “feature extraction.” Yet, if the external form of movement is not combined with the “aesthetic connotation,” it cannot form a language system with the capacity for artistic expression. This has particular guiding significance for national folk dance. This is because neither “elements” nor “techniques” can replace national folk dance’s aesthetic connotations accumulated in the history, and they may even destroy it. Without the aesthetic connotation, national folk dance loses its unique cultural meaning as language expression.

From this chapter’s discussion, we can see that the modernization of Chinese national folk dance choreography is not entirely due to the “contribution” of Western modern dance but is deeply related to its own development model and orientation. When we feel worried about Western modern dance, we should probably take a good look at our own system for dance construction. The deconstruction of folkloric traditional dance by the professional training system of Chinese national folk dance makes the change of Chinese national folk dance choreography not only a simple catering to Western modern dance but also an inevitable development brought by its own development with the change of the times. People in the new era certainly need new ways of expression, and traditional dance, even if it is excellent, will have a temporal distance. This distance is mainly reflected in the contradiction between “group” and “individuality.” Traditional folk dance, as a long-sedimented form, has more of a group value, that is, the overall cultural value that is cherished by a group. The emotional resonance that traditional folk dance evokes is often a deep-rooted shared emotion. However, dance creation in the current time does not need to be sedimented but only needs to be expressed in the present. So, it is more individualistic and beyond the group meaning of traditional folk dance. Students from the Department of Chinese National Folk Dance of the Beijing Dance Academy talked about the great difference in their feelings about folk dance after they returned from a folk dance field expedition, saying that the folk dance they used to

feel in the classroom was the folk dance of a certain teacher but that the folk dance they felt during the folk dance field expedition was the real folk dance of the people. It can be seen that in the training system of folk dance, the teachers all have some individuality in their bodies, which distances them from the folk. The changes that come from the field of teaching and training will certainly affect national folk dance choreography.

The broad and exemplary nature of academy-style folk dance is to a certain extent at the expense of the concrete and rich diversity of folk culture and the cultural semantics of movement. The choreographic works created on the basis of this teaching and training system tend to gradually incline toward the level of movement. Many innovations and new expressions are based on the mastery of the broad movement style, but the roots of traditional folk culture are diluted.

## CHAPTER 3

# *The Current Development of Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography*

Through a historical overview, we can see that the creation of contemporary Chinese folk dance is simultaneously stimulated by the external environment and pulled by the internal development logic, and it has become a highly representative and unique type of stage dance art creation in contemporary China. The uniqueness of this genre itself already has enormous cultural value. After more than half a century of development, it has entered a new developmental period in the new century. It is necessary for us to understand the current situation of Chinese national folk dance creation in a rational and serious way.

### 3.1. THE FLOURISHING AND PREPONDERANCE OF NATIONAL FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY

Let us first look at some statistics about national folk dance.

In 2003, the seventh Taoli Cup dance competition had the following situation for the single entry (in Junior A group and Youth group) in the three major dance categories: 180 entries for Chinese classical dance; 264 entries for Chinese national folk dance; and 90 entries for ballet. Group dance entries for the three categories were as follows: 3 for Chinese classical dance; 29 for Chinese national folk dance; and 16 for other dance styles.

In 2005, the National Folk Dance Competition in the fifth Chinese Dance "Lotus Prize" was held separately in Huaxi, Guizhou, with 68 programs from all over the country selected to participate in the final round of the competition. The other dance categories, including modern dance, contemporary dance, and Chinese classical dance, were held in Kunming, with a combined 57 dances entering the final round.

In 2006, 244 students were enrolled in the Department of Chinese



National Folk Dance at the Beijing Dance Academy and 80 students were newly enrolled in the national folk dance major, making it the largest professional department at the academy.

In the discussion on Dance Video Web, the votes cast for the question of which dance form one likes best are as follows (July 3, 2001–December 13, 2004):

89 votes for Chinese classical dance, making up 10.9%; 341 votes for Chinese folk dance, making up 41.7%; 83 votes for ballet, making up 10.2%; 112 votes for modern dance, making up 13.7%; 192 votes for contemporary dance, making up 23.5%.<sup>1</sup>

On the China Dance Web discussion, the voting statistics for the most popular types of dances are as follows (June 16, 2004–April 2, 2006):

27 votes for Chinese dance, making up 9.5%; 51 votes for modern dance, making up 18%; 124 votes for national dance, making up 43.8%; 12 votes for street dance, making up 4.2%; 33 votes for ballet, making up 11.6%; 20 votes for competitive ballroom dance, making up 7%; 6 votes for tap dance, making up 2.1%; and 10 votes for other, making up 3.5%.<sup>2</sup>

From these statistics, it is clear that Chinese national folk dance choreography still firmly dominates as the number one dance genre in China's overall dance production. Because the national dance competition does not carry out open classification of dance genres, we have not analyzed this. However, from the stylistic kinds seen in the competition pieces, Chinese national dance choreography still occupies an important position. In addition, national folk dance has an unshakable advantage in attracting audiences. In fact, in addition to these statistics, folk dance creation is extraordinarily active and prosperous in both the major national competitions and the performance market. A large number of excellent national folk dance works emerged from various dance competitions, and national folk dance is always the most enthusiastic and brightest scenic horizon on the various performance stages. The large-scale national dance and song collection *Dynamic Yunnan* has even raised the flag for the entirety of Chinese stage dance performance. Zi Huayun writes,

From the recovery period after the Cultural Revolution to the gradually deepening development of reform and opening up today, the subject

matter, genre, style, pattern, structure, language, and other aspects of national dance choreography all show a prosperous scene of diversified development. The innovative explorations of the new generation of choreographers have strongly impacted and broken through long-standing patterns, strengthening the visual and emotional impact of national dance. This is difficult for anyone to deny.<sup>3</sup>

Compared with Chinese classical dance, Chinese national folk dance, which is also in the category of Chinese dance, shows a more active situation in the inheritance and development of traditional cultural forms because of its rich source of traditional folk dance culture. This is an issue worth comparing and pondering over. As we have already mentioned, when New China was founded, the reconstruction of the dance culture system was deeply influenced by the Western classical ballet system, and the contemporary Chinese classical dance system was reconstructed on the basis of traditional opera and martial arts according to the structure and performance model of ballet. This system has long been devoted to the refinement of the cultural spirit, the essential elements of movement, and the movement patterns in Chinese traditional opera dance. In an attempt to solve the problem of style reconciliation between Western ballet and Chinese opera culture, the contemporary Chinese classical dance system has pioneered the establishment of the movement training system of “body rhyme” in contemporary Chinese classical dance. Of course, the evaluation of the “body rhyme” system is not the issue addressed in this book. However, excessive attention to the movement training system has caused contemporary Chinese classical dance correspondingly to neglect the excavation of historical classical dance forms and culture from prior to the emergence of Chinese traditional opera. The lack of sufficient attention to dance forms is not unrelated to the practice of focusing on the refinement of elements and movement patterns in the training of classical Chinese dance to the neglect of the overall cultural forms. This also leads to the lack of distinctive cultural qualities in the stage choreography extended from the classical Chinese dance training system. Many of the early works either favored traces of opera or were covering up a shadow of ballet. Later works such as *Wind's Chant* (Feng yin 风吟) and *Fan as a Brush* (*Shan wu danqing* 扇舞丹青) inevitably moved toward the “modernization” of choreographic techniques. If not for the research on Dunhuang dance and the exploration of the Han-Tang style, it would have been difficult to produce works like *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* (Silu hua yu 丝路花雨), *Dancers of the Tongque Stage* (*Tongque ji* 铜雀伎),

*Apsaras* (Feitian 飞天), *Foot Stamp Song* (Ta ge 踏歌), and *Chu Waists* (*Chu yao* 楚腰), which possess strong identifiers of traditional culture. Therefore, currently, Chinese classical dance choreography is getting more heavy and profound, leaning more toward modern choreographic techniques. This is precisely because of the lack of a source wellspring for traditional dance form and culture. On the contrary, although Chinese national folk dance has been influenced by many foreign cultures, the rich tradition of folk dance has never dried up the source of its creation. The training system of contemporary national folk dance has also been influenced by the deconstruction of elements, but it is not as subversive as that of contemporary classical Chinese dance. Therefore, in national folk dance, the connections between the source of traditional cultural forms and training and the creative forms onstage constitute a relatively complete interlinking system. Moreover, the canonization of Chinese national folk dance choreography has, to a certain extent, made up for the shortcomings of the traditional cultural forms in Chinese classical dance. We can even say that because Chinese national folk dance choreography is closer to and deeper into the real traditional form, it therefore has more traditional inheritance and historical imprints of Chinese culture.

### 3.2. UNCLEAR BELONGING AND THE CRISIS OF AN OLD CATEGORIZATION SYSTEM

Along with the rapid and diversified development of Chinese national folk dance choreography, the problem of blurred boundaries in categorization has become more and more serious. In the most strictly categorized dance competitions, the phenomenon of “can’t be categorized” or “can fit into any category” often occurs. Choreographers even adjust their competition participation categories at will, switching to contemporary dance as soon as they see that the competition in the national folk dance category is fierce. The phenomenon of fuzzy categorization, in fact, deeply reflects the crisis of the old dance classification system.

The myriad problems of classification in dance competitions cannot be entirely blamed on Western modern dance. However, the protrusion of these problems was brought about by the impact of Western modern dance. The influence of Western modern dance on Chinese dance has never been as obvious and extensive as it is today. However, since China did not really

experience the crisis of religion and rationality brought about by the industrialized society, this influence was more manifested in the superficial form in the early period. As a result, we, who are used to defining dance in terms of form, have lost our sense of belonging toward many “modernized” traditional dances. From the perspective of the cultural spirit of modern dance, if the early modern dance only embodied diversity and marginalization, then along with the postmodern deconstructionism, modern dance began to move toward artistic emptiness, rejecting rational explanations and judgments and even completely obliterating the boundaries between life and art. Of course, it also rejects rational categorization. This kind of impact implies the negation of the old order and obviously cannot be measured by the old standard.

The concept of “modern dance” (*xiandai wu* 现代舞) is a rather general and broad idea in China. Many people don’t understand the profound social background and specific development period of Western modern dance. Instead, they just get lost in the bizarre forms of modern dance, almost using “modern dance” to refer to any new and unfamiliar dance that is different from traditional dance. This is a very strange way of thinking. In the past, we defined the category of a dance genre based on its form. For example, when we talk about Tibetan dance, we will associate it with typical forms and rhythms, such as “three steps and a lift,” and use this as the basis for determining what is Tibetan dance. Likewise, when we talk about Chinese classical dance, we will associate it with typical forms such as “cloud hands” and “circling steps” and the movement patterns such as “when preparing to go left, first go right” and “round, bent, twisting, and leaning” and use them as the basis for determining what is classical dance. In the same way, in ballet, we think of typical forms such as “arabesque” and aesthetic characteristics such as being open, taut, and straight and use them as the basis for determining what is ballet. These traditional dances have gained unique stylistic qualities through sedimentation in long-term historical development. So, it is relatively easy to distinguish them based on form. However, the emergence and development of modern dance in the West has completely broken the thinking pattern of defining dance by its form. The endless innovations in form and the expansion of modern dance that breaks the boundaries of all dance genres have made “modern dance” impossible to define from the traditional sense of form. The simple question “What is modern dance?” will lead to a myriad of different answers. Any attempt to summarize the answer from the morphological characteristics is undoubtedly quite one-

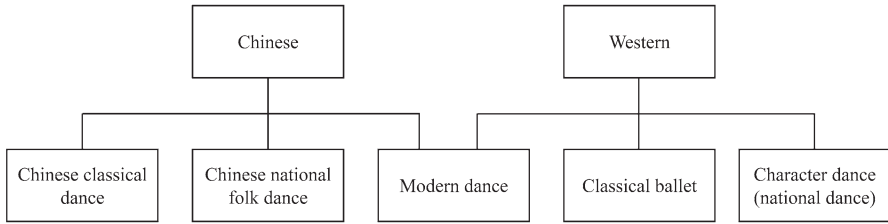
sided. That's why we can find some answers like "modern dance is a kind of concept" and "modern dance is the art of overcoming idolatry." These seem to be strange, but in fact they are avoiding an answer through summary of form.

In such a situation, many people unconsciously form a kind of reverse way of thinking. That is, unable to positively determine the morphological characteristics of modern dance, they take the traditional dance form as a reference to form a logical inverse deduction: if it is not the traditional form, then it is modern dance. In this way, the traditional dance form becomes a static, stable, and easy-to-grasp reference system, and what is beyond this system is attributed to modern dance. Modern dance thus becomes a dynamic, fluid, and difficult-to-grasp kind of dance. The same pattern of thinking is revealed in the birth of such concepts as "new dance" (*xin wudao* 新舞蹈) and "contemporary dance" (*dangdai wu* 当代舞). Whatever is not folk dance or Chinese classical dance or ballet and is also different from conventional understandings of Western modern dance thus becomes "new dance" or "contemporary dance." In fact, no one has ever clearly deciphered these concepts.

In this way of thinking, the changes in Chinese dance are almost all attributed to "modern dance," and people are anxious about the phenomenon of traditional dance becoming "modern dance." The dissolution of national styles, the loss of traditional culture, and the blurring of categories of dance genres have turned modern dance into a great scourge. The traditional system of defining dance genres in terms of form has formed a sharp conflict and contradiction with the creative and diversified system of modern dance. It has become such an issue that in creative dance competitions we often have to make a firm specification about the attributes of dance genres or else the whole world will be in chaos. Even so, we can see a lot of ambiguous "Chinese folk dance" or "Chinese classical dance" from time to time. The classification of dances has become a kind of intuitive and empirical scale, which makes "belonging" and "creation" a very profound contradiction in dance competitions. Are we competing in "belonging" or "creation"?

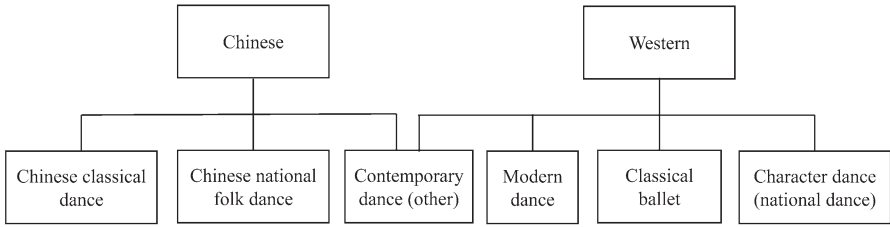
In fact, setting aside the influence of Western modern dance, our own dance classification system has had structural defects from the very beginning. In our old categorization system, there is first a general concept of Chinese and Western categorization, and then the next level imitates and applies the Western dance categorization model.

As we can see, regarding traditional dance, China and the West each



have their own dance cultural forms, but regarding modern dance, they are overlapping. Modern dance's entry into China also produced China's own modern dance. Modern dance can no longer be categorized by geographic location or specific forms. Also, in the strict sense, modern dance should be modern art in opposition to classical art, with a specific historical period as the dividing line. China's own cultural development in the period of modern art was almost empty, and it was only later encountered and imported from the West. After this, the development of Chinese dance in terms of traditional dance gradually developed a problem of incompatibility with the Western model. First, Chinese classical dance is different from Western classical ballet, because the former is a contemporary reconstructed system, which itself had already become a modern open system, not a true traditional type. Second, Western character dance itself developed as an appendage in classical ballets, and even Soviet and Eastern European national dance used a relatively uniform stage art canonization model. Yet, the field covered by Chinese national folk dance is much broader. From the perspective of canonicity it has a much more open range, with a greater amount of artistic creation. In terms of folkloric qualities, it is more closely connected to the folk level of culture and shows more diverse patterns. In terms of creative range, Chinese classical dance and Chinese national folk dance continuously break through traditional limitations and ultimately create confusion in modern and contemporary temporality. This results in the current addition of the category of "contemporary dance" to create balance.

The emergence of "contemporary dance" became a novelty in the classification system of Chinese dance, but it couldn't add clearer definitions. At the time, the confusion in categorization that appeared in dance competitions was the root of the controversy, while the confusion in categories itself came from the hardening of standards and rules in dance competitions. An obvious example is that when the military dance and "modernized" traditional dance appeared in dance competitions, our old system of stan-



dards was uncertain what to do. Thus, it used the simple method of adding a new category, without taking into consideration whether it was consistent with the larger categorization system. The Western “contemporary dance” itself is a rather clear category, an extension in temporality from “modern dance.” Narrowly defined “modern dance” corresponds to the cultural temporality of the period of the modernism movement in the arts and culture, while “contemporary dance” is used more often in Europe and more or less equates with US “postmodern dance,” a contemporary development that extends the modern dance period. Early modern dance itself has already become known as “classical” modern dance. Of course, the distinguishing line between the two is not clear, and contemporary dance just expresses a more moderate, tolerant, and diverse postmodern character compared to the progressive modern dance period. Therefore, Western classical, modern, and contemporary or postmodern form a rather continuous chain of development through time, creating the basic structure of professional art dance. Folk dance basically is not incorporated into this professional dance system but only exists as a peripheral dance form at the amateur level. China’s “contemporary dance” originally was intended to reflect Chinese dance in contemporary times. However, it has become separated from modern dance and lacks a line of continuous development and wholeness. It is important to note that this separation was not a separation of time but a calling into question of whether the cultural subject is “Western or Chinese.” This created a confusion with the Western concept of “contemporary dance,” where the “name” does not match the “reality.” Therefore, “contemporary dance” in China finally basically became those kinds of Chinese traditional dance that had incorporated a too large degree of modern dance and whose categorization was unclear. “Modern dance” in China basically became the transplantation and growth of modern dance with the quality of Western industrialized culture. Chinese and Western, traditional and modern, have all dislocated in contemporary time and space and become a hodgepodge. In fact, whether it

is “modern dance” or “contemporary dance,” they both contain Chinese and Western cultural components. They are all a “cultural *mélange*” of Chinese dance in the contemporary times, what American scholar Janet O’Shea has called “cross-cultural work.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, as early as the 1990s, the academic world had already seen the breakthrough and direction of Chinese traditional dance in the modern process. At that time, the creation and development of creative dances in traditional forms had already caused some doubts about the genre styles of Chinese classical dance and national folk dance. Yu Ping wrote that “the dilution of genre styles and the rise of this type of creative dance essentially implies the disintegration of the previous principles of dance categorization.” Yu further explained the concept of modern Chinese dance as follows: “‘Modern Chinese dance’ (*xiandai Zhongguo wu* 现代中国舞) as a ‘new synthesis’ of Chinese traditional dance is a concept that needs to be delimited. It does not refer to all the Chinese dances that exist in modern times, but to the modern style of Chinese traditional dance, the contemporary direction of our traditional dance.”<sup>5</sup>

From this we can see that the real root of the problem lies in the fact that Chinese traditional dance, including contemporary Chinese classical dance and contemporary Chinese national folk dance, because of the openness of its system, has a very obvious “contemporary direction” in its choreography. This “contemporary direction” has exceeded in terms of speed and degree the evolution that a stable historical dance form should have. Therefore, both “modern Chinese dance” and “contemporary Chinese dance” should be modern and contemporary styles that exist in contrast to stable historical styles, including stage creation styles. They must be built on the foundation of historical styles of traditional Chinese dance. China’s original ecology national folk dances provided a relatively stable historical traditional style, while the situation of Chinese classical dance is somewhat more complicated, so I won’t give unnecessary details here. In this way, we can return the concepts of “modern dance” and “contemporary dance” back to the Western dance system, while at the same time constructing a modern contemporary temporality in our own dance system. Because of the break in the modern temporality of China’s cultural development, I prefer the term “contemporary Chinese dance” (*dangdai Zhongguo wu* 当代中国舞). This should be a broader category of dance that does not detach from the traditional culture of Chinese dance but has the aesthetic and temperament of the contemporary Chinese era.



However, we should see that the contemporary development of Chinese traditional dance is still in a period of gradual transition and has not yet accumulated enough “capital” to construct a new mature category. For this reason, the concept and connotation of the category of “contemporary dance” are confusing. According to Zi Huayun, its works are not free from the dependence on other “established” dance genres. At least, there is a clear “imprint,” which makes it difficult to support the concept of an independent dance genre. On the basis of this understanding, Zi Huayun expressed her appreciation for the “other” (*qita* 其他) category set up by the Taoli Cup dance competition in addition to the conventional dance genres. She believes that this is a “non-definitive” or “non-limited” category, which not only can be interpreted and used internationally but also expands the space and capacity for diversified creative exploration. In fact, this kind of understanding grasps the transitional nature of the current situation of dance classification in China. It not only avoids setting up new categories hastily when the conditions are not yet ripe, which instead creates unnecessary confusion and controversy, but at the same time relatively protects the existing dance classification system. It especially avoids destabilizing the attributes of the traditional dance categories. This is because the dilution of the attributes of traditional dances, including Chinese national folk dance, is already enough to arouse our concern. Zi writes,

We do not restrict choreographers from creating various kinds and styles of dances according to their own personalities and aesthetic choices, nor do we narrowly consider that “national character” must follow specific regional styles and traditional forms, and cannot adapt, borrow, or develop. However, for thousands of years, national dances have become “markers” of various nationalities because of their specific cultural connotations and morphological characteristics, and this “marker” changes gradually with the development of the times. If the artist’s “reworking”—the artificial “degree of variation”—is far away from its inherent cultural connotation and morphological characteristics, it will not become the dance of “this nation” (a marker). Currently, the more obvious practice is to hang the sign of “national dance” but use “inferior foreign meat” as “innovation.”<sup>6</sup> A few specious “elements of folk dance movements” are casually and rigidly grafted onto “foreign forms” that have also not been carefully studied, resulting in the dilution and distortion of the attributes of national folk dance.<sup>7</sup>

Zi Huayun's discussion accurately pinpoints the crux of the dilution of the attributes of national folk dance choreography, that is, the loss of adherence to the subjectivity of traditional culture in the direction of the modern and contemporary era. It is precisely for this reason that we must adhere to the strict traditional bottom line in the categories of "Chinese classical dance" and "Chinese national folk dance." At the same time, we must reserve a place for the nonrestricted category of "other dances," reserving space for encouraging innovation and development, so as to form the temporal continuity of China's own cultural system.

In the Ministry of Culture's national dance competition, an attempt was made to adopt a noncategorized approach. On the one hand, it emphasizes creativity, and on the other hand, it avoids conflicts over categorization. However, non-categorization is only a kind of superficial illusion and operational flexibility. In fact, the genre style is still established in people's consciousness. It must be seen that what it ultimately points to is not absolute disorder but a process toward order, "breaking down before building up." After a short period of disorder, a new order should be established. This new order should, after experiencing the pains of disorder, profoundly resolve the contradictions and crises in order to reestablish stability and balance. Moreover, as a dance competition with strong operation and standardization, it is practically impossible not to categorize at heart. The rejection of a certain classification system in itself implies the quiet establishment of a new one. The current unclear situation creates an illusion of non-categorization. However, what is really changing is not the question of whether to classify but only the criteria for competition categories. Disorganization is not practical or sustainable. Dance competitions should not go into the void of non-categorization but rather keep trying to find a new and reasonable categorization system to keep up with the development of dance.

We must recognize the actual existence of the phenomenon of dance creation. The reality of the situation itself will not change. The key is how we construct new evaluation standards and systems rather than continuously repeating the dislocation of dialogue and judgment in the old system.

### 3.3. INAUTHENTICITY AMID THE COMMERCIAL ECONOMY AND ARTISTIC CONSUMERISM

The problem facing Chinese national folk dance choreography is not only the professional dispute between modernity and tradition and between

the West and the East. It is also the pursuit of desires in the early stage of China's market economy. People's extreme desire for profit and pleasure has become an irreversible trend. In fact, since the 1980s, the aesthetic change of Chinese folk dance choreography has been unavoidably reflecting all kinds of symptoms of China's rapid social transformation.

"Centering on economic construction" actually declares without words that the ideology-led integration of art and literature will, to a certain extent, be disintegrated and gradually fall into the trap of the market. When the art creation caught up in the tide of commodities and the spiritual home were drifting away from each other, commodity art and elite art became confused. In the national folk dances of the 1980s and early 1990s, we can still see the ideals and patriotism that flourished at the advent of the new era. Even with the uncertainty of spiritual belonging, it was still filled with a search and concern for the world of meaning. However, with the fierce impact of the market economy and commodity tide in the late 1990s, the idealism of the cultural elites began to be mercilessly mocked and coldly rejected. The reclaiming of culture and art since the 1980s, which had just revealed the image of exploring the modern values of Chinese people, because of the commercial tide that followed on its heels, drowned out the enthusiasm for value construction and the impulse to create history. The rapid disillusionment of ideals and the sudden loss of spirit have quickly plunged Chinese folk national dance choreography into contradiction and confusion. It either retreats to the narrow circle of dance professionals for self-indulgence or helplessly begins to rely on public taste and amid blandness brews more intense change. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, people's doubts about Chinese national folk dance choreography were unprecedentedly high. The different claims to tradition and modernity were nearly broken, and the dispute over the attributes of national folk dance was thrown into confusion. The denunciation of Chinese national folk dance choreography that was being criticized has not only not subsided but also intensified under the concept of consumption in the commodity society. Zi Huayun once cited the example of large galas and pointedly listed all the "symptoms" of dance creation:

The main manifestations of the large gala syndrome: 1. production replaces creation; . . . 2. "art hormones" replaces creative passion; . . . 3. fake tricks replace real skill; . . . 4. mechanical application and copying replace appropriate borrowing; . . . 5. appealing to vulgar taste and sensory stimulation replaces appreciation; . . . 6. dance itself atrophies.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that in the tide of secularization, we can see more and more frequently national folk dance choreography with gaudy packaging and nakedness. The cause of these external “symptoms” is precisely the profound conflict between material civilization and spiritual civilization that China faced at the turn of the twenty-first century. As artist creators, their understanding and mastery of traditional culture used to be their proud spiritual capital. However, when the traditional cultural value was replaced by market value, which tends to be more practical and profitable, the artists became creative “workers.” No longer possessing the guiding power of culture and a sense of superiority, they can only engage in artistic “production” according to the demands of the market and profit. Please note that in the industrialized chain of market art, from “art production” to “art packaging” to “art sales,” “art production” becomes the primary upstream chain that replaces the service of the downstream chain. When art becomes a commodity to be consumed, the independent personality and artistic power must face the danger of being lost. Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 writes,

The cultural market initiated by culture characterized by consumption, while greatly promoting the development of the mass culture industry, also constituted a great assault on the elite culture or serious culture; while strengthening the recreational function of culture, it made people’s desires become unchecked and expand. Moreover, the market, as a driving force, also to varying degrees changed the orientation of elite culture.<sup>9</sup>

There is a great difference between the popular art under the influence of the market and the traditional view of people’s art. Although the people’s view of art takes the people as the target subject of art, in essence, it still takes the cultural elites as the guiding force. They take the people as the slogan but have the superior position in culture and even have the power to judge the value of art and literature. However, the tide of commodities has plunged the spiritual status of the cultural elite into the abyss. This is because the masses possessed the ability to master culture through the popularization and rapid circulation of commercial culture. The market culture, however, appears in a neutral character, with no fixed and unchanging position, and the only criterion for evaluation is the profit principle of the market. This kind of culture can not only continuously reproduce one-time consumption of vulgar performances but also push exquisite art products to the top of the market. Its enormous power to infiltrate has caused the powerlessness of elite art in the face of the masses and a complete retreat of the spiritual

defense line. Whether it is holding fast to or abandoning art, the former judge has become the object to be judged by the market. Shao Mujun writes, "When the value of cultural products has to be determined by the majority, the makers of the products (writers, artists) will have to free themselves from the convention of forcing others to tend toward the self and embark on the road of forcing the self to tend toward others."<sup>10</sup> It is the change of the role of the judge and the transfer of the standard of judgment that make the application of art criticism to commodity art a misplaced criticism. The confusion between commodity art and elite art has made the whole mechanism of criticism ineffective.

This created a contrast with the situation of literature and the arts under the mature market economy of the West. Taking the United States with its active performing arts market as an example, the levels of its artistic market are very clear. Las Vegas shows have a strong commercial color. From extravagant shows to topless nightclub performances, Las Vegas performance culture is a mix of colorful songs and dances and exciting acrobatics. The "show," whose main purpose is to maximize commercial interests, pushes the entertainment and watchability to the extreme. It has no artistic boundaries or artistic standards. It can shed all its clothes for the sake of business and can also absorb artistic elements for the sake of business. As a cultural center, Manhattan, New York, has gathered together countless outstanding artists and art groups of the world, and the levels in its performing arts market are very typical. The long strip of Manhattan is divided into Uptown, Midtown, and Downtown, with the famous Broadway district located in Midtown, which is also the most active place for theater arts. Traditional Broadway performances are mainly divided into two major types: musicals and plays. Due to the long history and culture of Broadway, although it is a commercial show district, it is basically positioned as a place where art and entertainment are given equal importance. Therefore, Broadway's artistic style is more approachable and easy to understand. Yet, at the same time, it adheres to its own artistic style and scale. There will not be Las Vegas-style gaudy performances. Downtown is the world of modern and contemporary avant-garde artists, with a large number of independent artists and small art groups. There are artists living here, such as in Soho, where life design is the main focus. There is the new Off-Broadway, which is different from traditional Broadway, where shows are more lively and produced on a smaller scale and where there are no clear boundaries between artistic disciplines, such as *Stomp* and shows by Blue Man Group, which combines percussion, dance,

and mime performances; there are also small theaters dedicated to modern dance performances, such as the famous Joyce Theater and Dance Workshop. Near Uptown, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts is the temple of serious art, where the world-famous Metropolitan Opera, New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and other world-class arts groups stage the world's top level of opera, ballet, and concerts; in addition, the Lincoln Center Arts Festival brings together the world's outstanding modern and contemporary dance, and the Julliard School and the School of American Ballet are among many elegant art education institutions. The bottom line of serious art is strictly adhered to here, where ordinary commercial performances will never appear on the stage.

We see that in such a hierarchical division, art creates different communities according to its various needs, with different pursuits and different markets. Artists can choose according to their own preferences. However, each community is not isolated from each other but will insist on their own subjectivity while at the same time carrying out exchanges. For example, the principal cast of the American Ballet Theatre performed in the dance-oriented Broadway musical *Moving Out*. The vibrant and organized art market drives the artistic atmosphere of the whole society, so when you walk through the streets and subways of New York you can enjoy street art of exquisite quality. On the contrary, in our art field, there is no differentiation between differently positioned groups and communities. Our art is in a state of confusion in the transition from administrative management to the market, and the roles of art practitioners have also become mixed up. After national folk dance choreography lost the protection of the old system, it was necessarily plunged into economic panic and disordered choices. Because of this, our creators want to engage in the creation of real art but also to choreograph for the commercial and entertainment galas to make money. This reminds me of the American lighting designer Jennifer Tipton's well-intentioned warning to the participants of a workshop at the Beijing Dance Academy: doing too much lighting design for commercial performances could have the danger of eroding one's artistic integrity. I think the same may be true for choreography. Even in professional dance circles, a large portion of national folk dance choreography has become an artistic illusion that alienates the mind. The framework that supports creation is no longer the inner impulse and artistic expression but the government-funded cultural behavior or utilitarian dance competitions. Under the stimulation of utilitarian reality, the audience of art tends to give up the pursuit of the

world of meaning and chooses to fulfill their desires and enjoy themselves. Wang Shuo's famous saying "Ignorant people have no fear" summarizes the mentality of those who are satisfied with the trivial pleasures of life. It is the emptiness of culture that removes the fear of culture. Let's look at a reflection by Yu Feng 郁风 in 1980:

Ethnic minority costumes are generally strong, colorful, and dignified. Sequins and gauze run counter to this. In particular, it is said that the Tibetan pieces have started using nylon gauze for the costumes, really unimaginable! The local characteristics of the high plateau climate, the thick texture of woolen materials and the strong contrasting colors have all been negated completely by that gauzy lightness!<sup>11</sup>

Compared to today's national folk dance choreography, the proliferation of beauty and body culture has resulted in more revealing costumes, and the dazzling sequins and flowing nylon gauze of the 1980s leave nothing to speak of. However, we will sadly discover that the power to reverse the direction of art is not entirely in the hands of literary and art criticism. The rapid development of the social reality may allow us to calmly face it and then quietly wait while letting out our voice. Consumption, desire, enjoyment, the tide of the commodity economy, and the consumerist view of art have made much national folk dance choreography become "false flowers in full bloom." For a moment, the colorful splendor blurred our eyes with phantasm. But under that gorgeous appearance, we can no longer smell the fragrance of the flowers and the breath of the soil.

## CHAPTER 4

# *Calling for Cultural Self-Consciousness in Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography of the New Era*

Compared with its music, fine arts, and other major art categories, China's dance art is relatively weak in terms of literary and artistic self-consciousness. It is in urgent need of a rational understanding of its own historical development and real situation. In addition, our weakness has become a kind of compromise in both dance art creation and dance literary and art criticism. Dance art creation and dance literary and art criticism require a healthy dialogue and joint refusal to compromise. This benign dialogue must be based on mutual respect for each other's fields. As far as literary and art criticism is concerned, the interpretation of artistic creation is never criticism for the sake of criticism. The significance of artistic creation in dance is realized in artistic communication, and the creator must have the ability to be judged by others.

### 4.1. UNDERSTANDING THE ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT OF CHINESE NATIONAL FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY

Dance is a kind of body culture. When we put dance as the core object into the environment for examination, we will find that body culture in the modern society is facing a predicament of decline. Yet, it also has an irreplaceable value. The role of national folk dance as a kind of traditional body culture is particularly obvious.

As we all know, the language of dance is a kind of human body language. Before humanity developed written language, body language must have been humanity's basic means of communication and emotional expression. This oldest language has naturally become the most genuine language of human



beings, because its carrier is that on which human beings most fundamentally depend—the body. The human body, as the medium of artistic expression in dance, is the most primitive, the most direct, and the most essential material that human beings can rely on. In the course of human progress, as society becomes more modernized, the degree of dependence on the body decreases. To a large extent, social progress has followed rapid developments in tools. The telephone has replaced visits, the automobile has replaced walking, computers control mechanization, and so on, and functions of human physiology have already been replaced by myriad tools. At the same time, there are more and more means and media for people to express their emotions, and people are more and more accustomed to conveying their emotions by means and media other than the body. At the same time, people are more and more detached from the real body that does not “lie.”

However, the most simple thing is often the most profound. It is precisely the simple body that allows us to more closely listen attentively to life. In traditional national folk dance, we can discover—is not the body in dance the most direct way to understand life? In ancient traditional dance, we can often prominently feel the motive force of life. Nothing can take the place of the cultural meaning of body language within traditional national folk dance. In the midst of exploding information, it persistently maintains the essence of life and expresses the most plain, essential, and profound content. Everything that humanity possesses can be expropriated except for the body and soul. We can see that what the body expresses is precisely those things deep in the soul that are difficult to express in words. Yet, in traditional national folk dance, that distant cultural information is also the precious memory of the past that was lost in humanity’s rapid development.

In the ecological environment of this core object of contemporary national folk dance choreography, the economy and politics are two major ecological items (ecological elements in the common theoretical sense—fields with an ecological connection to dance).<sup>1</sup> As the economic basis of society, the system and methods of economic development determine society’s progress. They also determine the development of culture and art that forms the superstructure. In the final analysis, the impact of modernity and the commercial inundation that national folk dance choreography faces is caused by changes to the economic foundation. Because national folk dance choreography is a form of socialist literature and art, the impact of politics is also great. Much of the development and direction of literature and art requires the govern-

ment's active guidance. As Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 points out, "Mainstream culture is the culture that expresses the nation's orthodox ideology. Regardless of what kind of system a country has, it will always express the ideology of its own country's determination and interests. Authoritativeness is the primary characteristic of this cultural pattern. In today's China, 'main melody' (*zhu xuanlü* 主旋律) is the cultural expressive form of orthodox ideology. It promotes the Party's leaders, praises the revolutionary tradition, and advocates socialist spiritual civilization as its foundational characteristics."<sup>2</sup> The mainstream form of Chinese national folk dance choreography must be positioned under the standardization and guidance of politics. In fact, the guiding significance of the party's traditional people's art on the development of national folk dance is very heavy. In the current prominent expression, it is the "three closenesses": close to reality, close to life, and close to the masses. These three "closenesses" themselves very much are close to the essential creative special character of national folk dance.

National folk dance choreography also bridges the on- and offstage dance cultures. For this reason, carrying on the inheritance of the dance body bridges three different groups: the choreographers, the dancers, and the audience. As professionals, the choreographers and dancers hold a more active position in the creative process. As recipients, the audience, especially under the push of the market economy, also has a major influence on the creation of national folk dance. Just as Zi Huayun points out:

Economic inputs, governmental decrees, authoritative judgments, and the cultivation and guidance of aesthetic consumption are ecological factors that play an important role in optimizing the social and cultural environment. They influence each other and work together in the development of the "dance industry" and "dance style"—forming a net of ecological effects. The strength of economic input is the basis for strengthening governmental decrees, while the guidance of economic input depends on policy orientation; "governmental decree," "market," and "authoritative judgment" all have the effect of mutual constraints, and the ideal relationship between them should be both independent of each other and complementary to each other; in essence, the effect of social-historical selection is decisive for the development of culture and art, which is driven by the aesthetic consumption choices of the "audience"—over the long term. In any dynasty or society, this "driving force" cannot

be a purely spontaneous product, but is the result of the postponement of the implementation of certain policies under the constraints of certain political and economic interests. To grasp the forward direction of advanced culture, it is undoubtedly necessary to pay attention to cultivating the guiding orientation of cultural consumption.<sup>3</sup>

This passage summarizes the ecological environment that influences dance choreography, which is also of great relevance to national folk dance choreography. We can see the multidimensional system in which all ecological factors work together in the creation of dance. We can also see the temporal nature of their effects on the creation of dance. If we can see this clearly, we will not lose our position in the complex ecological environment, and we will not lose sight of the future in the temporary confusion.

#### 4.2. “PLACING PEOPLE AT THE CENTER” AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO REBUILD CHINA’S DANCE CULTURE SYSTEM

Recently in China, the phrase “placing people at the center” has been used with extreme frequency as the core of the scientific outlook on development. After a long period of ups and downs, we have finally returned to the original method of strategic guiding thought in governance. This is undoubtedly a major reflection and historical breakthrough in the contemporary progression of Chinese society. Returning from ideology to humanism provided an important opportunity for the construction of the system of Chinese dance culture. After the comprehensive collision of Chinese and Western cultures and the intense baptism of the market economy, the Chinese dance culture system needs to be adjusted through reflection. An opportunity to make adjustments and changes had arrived. In Chinese philosophy, human existence is the unity of the metaphysical and the physical, form and spirit, body and mind. The separation of soul and body and the opposition of spirit and matter in the West are what Chinese traditional philosophy is strongly against and strives to avoid. The establishment of a Chinese dance culture system must return to its own cultural spirit. As a vital part of China’s system of dance culture, national folk dance must recognize three major problems in this process of construction.

#### 4.2.1. Hidden Worries and Responsibility for Breakdown of Dance Culture in the New Era

In the discussion above, we have already analyzed the phenomenon of rupture in Chinese national folk dance. This kind of break is not only a rupture with the historical temporality but also a break with the current reality. The former brought people's confusion about the style and value that traditional culture should take in modern times. It also brought modern people's disregard for traditional culture and the danger of interruption of inheritance. Because traditional dance is a culture carried by the body, the historical break is by no means sensationalized. It has happened in history and is happening today. Original national folk dances are facing a crisis of extinction due to the rapid changes in the social environment. As a staged extension of the original folk dance, national folk dance choreography cannot serve as the vanguard intensifying this historical rupture further.

The latter, on the other hand, created a false cultural illusion of national folk dance in the context of a modern and radical commodity culture. When there is rapid material growth in society but the development of morality and spirituality lags, the gap between the two can still lead to social collapse. From the sacredness of ideologically driven frenzy during the Cultural Revolution to the proliferation of secularism under the impact of the commodity economy after the 1980s, Chinese society has continuously lacked the support of a humanistic spirit of the current reality. The noble spirit has been reduced to empty slogans, and the fragile cultural value system has rapidly collapsed in the surging economic tide. National folk dance choreography cannot play the role of completely seeking refuge, thus aggravating this spiritual lack. In the new period, our concern for "placing people at the center," the pursuit of "national studies fever," and the return to traditional culture are in fact a summary of the traditional values of the Chinese people and are precisely what we have lost in the period of social transformation. Its reintroduction is obviously aimed at abandoning and eradicating all kinds of ugly phenomena in Chinese society and stopping the lack of morality brought about by the economic marketization. Its focus is precisely on the main body of society, the human being. Placing such a high priority on real people has given our dance culture a true fulcrum. Whether it is a historical rupture or a break in the current reality, it needs to be renewed through the perfection of human beings themselves. National folk dance choreography,

as the presentation of traditional dance on the contemporary stage, must have the concerned awareness of this cultural rupture. It must also assume the responsibility of improving the cultural system. At a time when culture and spirit have already begun to be revitalized, to only solely pursue material gains represents a delay and reversal of the cultural consciousness of short-sighted art practitioners.

#### 4.2.2. The “Other’s View” That Deviates from One’s Own Cultural Values

The fact that, in the process of canonization, Chinese folk dance choreography has unconsciously deviated from its own cultural value and has been alienated by foreign cultures is another issue that we should address. In the context of contemporary globalization, the mutual influence of cultures is unavoidable. However, complete alienation will inevitably deprive our own culture of the opportunity to develop.

Traditional Chinese opera is a highly refined art form that combines music and dance. The dance within Chinese opera complements other components and has a unique appeal. Under the influence of the model of Western classical ballet, opera dance was regarded as not having the quality of independent dance and was separated, was deconstructed, and absorbed ballet’s structural model to establish the form of national dance drama. After coming into contact with the fusion of song and dance in Western musicals, we started to build and develop a Chinese musical theater system. In fact, in retrospect, isn’t the traditional opera, which is “storytelling through song and dance,” exactly the “musical theater,” which is a fusion of song and dance? We are not negating such a historical process but only reflecting on the historical reality. Are we not in the absence of cultural self-consciousness tending to easily fall into the “other’s vision” that has deviated from our own cultural values? Specifically, in Chinese national folk dance itself, in fact, dance as a kind of space-time art, traditional dance styles contain traditional conceptions of movement in time and space. Movement, time, and space are the ultimate propositions of philosophy and the essential questions of a worldview, and the concepts of movement, time, and space embodied in traditional national folk dance contain the cultural spirit of China. This reflects China’s unique dance cultural heritage. It is different from the cultural system of Western dance and cannot be judged through the “other’s view.” For example,

in the Han nationality's flower drum lantern (*huagudeng* 花鼓灯), the agile, martial arts-colored "tossing, turning, and shifting" is clearly a manner of movement and physical culture with Chinese character. If we change this manner of movement, the cultural heritage will disappear. In fact, there is a similar introspection in the Western cultural process. The ethnocentrism of the West has made the West the center of its vision of the world. The discourse of "Far East" and "Middle East" still reflects traces of this cultural vision. However, the global spread of Western culture and the extinction of indigenous cultures in Africa, North America, and Oceania have ultimately led to a rethinking of cultural globalization. It is precisely the "other's view" of ethnocentrism that we must guard against.

For national folk dance, although the situation is better, contemporary national folk dance choreography is not entirely driven by the internal force of self-development. It is mixed with too many complex foreign cultural factors, so divergent paths and traps of alienation also exist. As an agricultural culture, national folk dance choreography must be integrated into the modern condition. However, this modern condition must not be completely based on that of the Western industrialized society as the only reference. Sometimes we have even confused the perspective of literary and art criticism. Involuntary dislocation occurs constantly, often ignoring the rationality of the internal process of culture itself. The fallacy of using one culture to criticize another occurs. Even the preservation of our own traditional culture has to be carried out in response to the call for intangible cultural heritage by the United Nations and the criticism of globalization by Western scholars. In the absence of cultural self-awareness, more impetus and standards for cultural development come from outside. In fact, when culture is viewed from different perspectives, its value judgments are very different. This is a phenomenon Zi Huayun calls "cultural siege" (*wenhua weicheng* 文化围城). The modernization process of Western dance culture was also full of doubt and confusion. Most of its folk dance development is in a state of self-generation and self-extinction in the realm of the folk, where there has been rapid atrophy in the process of modern industrialization. In the face of this, the West has a kind of mentality of loss and thus views the traditional dance culture still retained in underdeveloped countries as doubly cherished. However, from the point of view of the cultures of the less developed countries, the modernization of their societies cannot be sacrificed for this purpose. In the development of contemporary dance in Europe, there are some "anti-technique" and "anti-training" tendencies in pursuit of

the simplicity and naturalness of dance. These are naturally present in the real folk dance. So, when they saw the highly specialized and staged development of Chinese national folk dance, they were surprised and puzzled. They overlooked the fact that if Chinese national folk dance did not have a unique contemporary development model, wouldn't it be like the Western traditional folk dance culture, which gradually "died out on its own"? In fact, China internally is also the same. When we sigh and feel anxious over the loss of traditional dance culture in remote areas, these areas will fight for the right to place development as the first priority. So, the "protection" of traditional dance culture has become an active behavior of developed regions toward the less developed regions or a passive catering by less developed regions to the developed regions.

Therefore, in order to avoid all sorts of problems and to reconstruct China's dance culture system, we still have to look for the roots in traditional Chinese culture. The spirit of "harmony" in Chinese traditional culture has provided us with a dynamic basis. Feng Youlan said, "Entering the world and leaving the world are opposites, just as realism and idealism are also opposites. The task of Chinese philosophy is to unify these oppositions into a single proposition. This does not mean that all these counterpropositions have been canceled. They are still there, but they have been unified into a synthetic whole. How are they unified? This is the problem that Chinese philosophy seeks to solve. To solve this problem is the spirit of Chinese philosophy."<sup>4</sup> Chinese culture has always been in pursuit of "harmony," including the extremely different elements of Chinese culture and Western culture. We are also working hard to strive for "harmony." This process itself has become our cultural characteristic and pursuit. However, the premise of "harmony" is still to insist on one's own subjectivity and the perspective of looking from within oneself.

#### 4.2.3. How to Correctly Understand the Industrialization of Literature and Art

Compared to the controversy over modernity and tradition in Chinese national folk dance choreography, the problem of how to face the market impact brought about by the industrialization of literature and art is even more crucial. In the process of rebuilding the system of dance culture, we must realize that with it has also come the transformation of China's

entire organizational system of literature and the arts. The dance ensembles supported by the government were forcibly pushed into the market, and the trend of commercialization of art schools has become more and more intense. All of this can be seen as the flag of the industrialization of literature and art fluttering. In the field of creation, we can see that in the tide of the commodity economy, a large amount of national folk dance choreography showed various tendencies toward utilitarianism and appealing to vulgar tastes. Yet, there are also a small number of works that within the market rid themselves of the vulgar literary and artistic orientation and became bright spots. This shows that art has a long-lasting power and at the same time also has market value. Even in Las Vegas, the most prestigious “shows” are by no means low, purely commercial shows but also incorporate elements of art.

Therefore, the industrialization of literature and art is not a total surrender to the market. For national folk dance choreography, as something that possesses the values of traditional culture, the real industrialization should be adhering to and maximizing the special core value of art itself. Through a certain mode of market operation, it should work hard to promote this value to get social recognition rather than completely give up one’s self-worth and completely dance to the market. Market operation is a means, but not all art depends on it to survive. We should also distinguish between different levels in the industrialization of literature and arts, separating entertainment from art. Entertainment is totally oriented to operation and the market. Art is a cooperation with the market that requires a more independent character. The two should not be mixed up.

In addition, we should also pay attention to changes in the audiences of Chinese national folk dance choreography. In our traditional ideas about creation, there is a broad and abstract concept of “the people,” art should be for “the people,” and art should be enjoyed by “people.” Chinese national folk dance choreography also attaches importance to the so-called ethnic identity. However, under the fierce impact of the commodity economy, the “people” and “ethnic groups” representing the audience have also changed under this influence. Taking what average people “enjoy” as a criterion for evaluation of artistic creation has been put to the test today. This is because the view of consumerism has eaten away at the spiritual pursuits of art. The connotation of “enjoyment” has changed. When the prosperity of commodity culture has oriented the public’s interest toward vulgarity and hedonism and when the public’s ability to understand art is falling under the decline of traditional culture, we cannot exclusively cater to the public’s taste for



“enjoyment” in our creative work. We should show the leading posture that elite culture should have.

Perhaps under the market conditions, the artistic authenticity of contemporary national folk dance choreography lies not in how close it is to the tradition but in whether it completely follows the flow of the commodity market. The industrialization of literature and art should not become a factory for manufacturing “fake flowers.”

#### 4.3. CALLING FOR CULTURAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN CHINESE NATIONAL FOLK DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY

Against the larger background of rebuilding the system of dance culture, Chinese national folk dance, which exists as an elite culture, is calling for cultural self-awareness in the new era. While the old generation of dancers absorbed and created directly from the folk dance culture in a pure environment, the new generation of dancers is more confronted with a diversified and complicated cultural environment. In this sense, Chinese national folk dance choreography requires artistic self-awareness. At issue is not only the guardianship of traditional art but also the call for the lost spiritual home in the commodity society.

##### 4.3.1. Aesthetic Roots of Debates over Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography

As for the development of Chinese national folk dance choreography, it is not so much that we are panicked by innovation but rather that we are panicked by the speed and extent of innovation. That is, we do not object to innovation itself but feel uncomfortable with the speed and degree of innovation. According to the theoretical discussions of Ernst H. Gombrich, a famous British art historian, this is due to the “sense of order” and “matching error.” In his research on visual law, Gombrich interpreted “sense of order” as an “inherent predictive function,” which is actually an aesthetic expectation triggered by an aesthetic habit. Each individual’s aesthetics will be influenced by their own cultural background, upbringing, and other factors. Thus, experience accumulates to form individuals’ own aesthetic habits, and on the basis of this, there forms a kind of internal expectation for the art

they will enjoy. When this expectation is realized in the aesthetic activities, the match is achieved; on the contrary, when the aesthetic activities deviate from this expectation, there will be a matching error. For national folk dance choreography, the traditional cultural styles accumulated and inherited over a long period of time formed relatively stable aesthetic habits. So, when a new aesthetic form emerges due to innovation, it will cause a "matching error" with the original aesthetic habits, thus causing discomfort. When the degree of this matching error is not too large, people will have a sense of freshness and try to adjust their inner "sense of order" to adapt. But when the degree of the matching error is too great, people cannot accept it because they are limited by their own "sense of order," and this leads to rejection.

This can explain why national folk dance choreography is so controversial. Because of the very deep tradition of national folk dance, the degree of innovation is often limited to a certain extent; otherwise it will cause panic and opposition. This is different from Western modern art, which advocates individualistic creativity and even has a cultural orientation that pursues matching errors. Of course, it is also difficult to judge what degree of change will cause controversy, because everyone makes different judgments and reactions according to their own sense of order. The development of national folk dance choreography can only move forward in a gradual way through an overall effect of "synergy." Progress is inevitable, but the speed of progress has limits. In the historical development of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography, we can also find that people are often in an intermediate state, that is, not feeling satisfied with a complete lack of change but having difficulty accepting things that are drastically changed. Most people always like to have some not too big changes and freshness within their own familiar scope. However, once the changes are too big and completely out of their own familiar scope and develop into a sense of unfamiliarity, it will produce a feeling of rejection. Therefore, the sense of distance between national folk dance choreography and tradition in fact greatly affects our feelings and opinions about folk dance and is also the root of the controversy.

The historical process of any culture cannot be reversed, including mistakes. We can only move forward in a process of reflection and continuous correction. Moreover, unlike the accumulation of knowledge, culture tends to move forward in a curving line that at a certain point returns to its origin. Therefore, national folk dance choreography can only face the present and the future while reflecting on history. It is forward moving in spirit; that is, it

must be in step with the times, advancing forward. But, it is backward facing in thought; that is, it must reflect while recalling history in order to maintain the vitality and self-consciousness of thought.

#### 4.3.2. The Dual Belonging of Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography

Before the genre of “contemporary Chinese dance” is clearly established, we must face the problem of scale in the belonging of national folk dance choreography. As a matter of fact, from the perspective of the traditional Chinese cultural thinking of “the middle way,” we actually do not attach much importance to belonging. Discourses such as “using the past to serve the present,” “using the foreign to serve China,” and “learning from the strengths of others” are not strictly limiting the sense of belonging but are opening up exchange between different belongings under the premise of emphasizing subjectivity. But at the same time, in practice, we also attach great importance to belonging, and we are eager to create labels of categorization and to label each work with a category. And because of the traditional cultural value of national folk dance, we have to respect its sense of belonging and take the responsibility of passing it on. Therefore, the problem of classification in Chinese national folk dance choreography has a dual nature—on the one hand, in the level of creative theory, and on the other hand, in the level of practical operation and culture.

In terms of creative theory, one should not place limitations of classification on dance choreography. The concept of belonging should not be brought into the field of creation. In *Choreoecology*, Zi Huayun distinguishes between the concepts of dance speech, dance language, and dance vocabulary. She clarifies the confusing use of these terms, which is quite useful on this issue. Speech and language are two completely different concepts; the former is specific and individual, while the latter is universal. For example, a person speaking a passage in Chinese is using the Chinese “language,” while the specific content of what that person says is “speech.” Similarly, dance speech is specific and individual, without universal meaning, so it corresponds to different dance works created by individual choreographers. Dance vocabulary and dance language are also two different concepts. Dance vocabulary is, according to Zi, “the sum of a group of dance words and dance word combinations with the same or similar morphological characteristics and capable

of expressing the same or similar meanings in the same dance genre," while dance language is "the general pattern of dance speech summarized from dance speech, a system of dance vocabulary that has been formed through historical transmission."<sup>5</sup> If we consider dance language as a language in the broad sense, then dance vocabulary is like different language kinds, and dance language is, of course, at the highest and most widespread level. For example, in a dance work that uses the material of Shandong's *guzi yangge*, *guzi yangge* is the dance vocabulary and the work itself is the choreographer's dance speech, which is all included under the dance language. In my opinion, in essence, dance creation belongs to the level of dance speech, which is specific, is individual, is without universal meaning, and cannot be divided by the common concept of species. Therefore, in terms of theory, it is necessary to firmly separate creation from the confusion over classification.

Of course, in actual practice, we place great emphasis on the question of belonging to a dance genre. Unlike the Western notion of emphasizing a certain work or a certain artist, we are accustomed to achieving order in categorization and enjoying group honors and achievements within categories of belonging. On the one hand, for example, *Riverdance* does not have a precise category definition in the Western performance market; the emphasis is on the brand of *Riverdance* itself. On the other hand, we are accustomed to attributing a category or a belonging to all kinds of choreography. *Riverdance* is labeled as an Irish tap dance drama, and *Dynamic Yunnan* labels itself as a collection of original ecology ethnic songs and dances. In particular, dance competitions that categorize creative dances are inherently a system of power. This system must have a certain standard of measurement in order to be operable, even though this practical operation does not have theoretical guiding significance. Yet, on the cultural level, this issue of belonging becomes particularly important. The inheritance of national folk dance culture currently faces the history and reality of the double rupture. As a result, how to keep a connection with the roots of traditional culture has become an important issue with significance for survival. Therefore, in actual practice, we need the concept of belonging or classification. Culturally speaking, we should firmly call for the self-awareness of this belonging in national folk dance choreography.

How should this belonging in national folk dance be understood and grasped? When discussing the cross-cultural comparison of dances, Zi Huayun once pointed out: "When comparing the dance language and dance vocabulary, the focus of investigation is neither on the 'commonality' deter-

mined by the common aesthetic psychological mechanism of human beings nor on the 'minor differences' determined by individual temperament, cultivation, or life experience. Rather, it is on the part of the 'common characteristics' that have cultural specificity created by the macro environment."<sup>6</sup> This passage makes it clear that the concern with belonging in national folk dance is centered on the cultural specificity formed by traditional aesthetic qualities. It is not the subtle individual differences of personal creativity but rather the culture that represented a certain nation (group).

#### 4.3.3. The Unique Pattern of Chinese National Folk Dance Choreography Development

The dance forms passed down in the field of choreography are not as singular as those naturally passed down in folklore. They have a more complex mode of inheritance. Because of the artist's self-consciousness, this inheritance has greater creativity and variability. Moreover, this kind of inheritance is determined jointly by the created dance body and the received dance body. Therefore, the important difference between the inheritance in national folk dance choreography and the natural inheritance in folk dance lies in the cultural self-awareness of the choreographer. As a creator, the choreographer should always stand in a higher position than the folk culture to consciously understand and grasp this kind of culture. Culture and art's reflection on the experience and lessons of history can indirectly steer the orientation of national folk dance choreography through the cultural consciousness of the choreographer. In this way, the choreographer makes it a controllable cultural style with higher cultural value.

This is exactly the case in reality. In the cultural context of China, where modernity and tradition, East and West, are intertwined, Chinese national folk dance choreography has developed into a unique style with considerable value. It has used the culture of a group to restrict individual artistic creation, inhibiting the forgetting and abandonment of traditional culture and mitigating the downward slide toward Western culture. On the other hand, in encouragement of openness and innovation, it has preserved the self's vitality for forward development. Thus, the Chinese national folk dance choreography that we see is a kind of living inheritance with a pluralistic orientation situated between modernity and tradition. It has not produced a situation of extreme severance from history and tradition. It maintains the connection

with the root of tradition either in form or in content, such that no matter how high the kite flies, one end of its string is still tied to the root of tradition. The important difference between national folk dance choreography and completely unrestricted modern dance choreography lies in the fact that although the artistic mind takes flight, its heart is sentimentally attached to the earth.

Thus, when folk dance culture becomes unsustainable in the folk context as economic life develops, national folk dance choreography takes up a considerable portion of the transmission and dissemination of traditional culture. The fact that the original songs and dances of *Dynamic Yunnan* have moved onto the stage is a great change in the mode of survival of traditional culture. The real peasant dancers were saved from lives of manual labor, and at the same time, their dance culture was also saved. Culture always comes back in cycles. The qualities of each culture may be out of fashion at some stage, but it doesn't mean it is forever. Culture's intrinsic value is an invaluable human experience to be cherished. It may at times be painful and lonely to persist in culture, but national folk dance choreography is destined to be a carrier of traditional culture, and it is destined to bear the responsibility of a carrier. Yet, Chinese national folk dance choreography has not completely stuck to the traditional style. It has not remained in the old temporality, making its ancient elements into objects of curiosity for Western culture. Feng Youlan said: "The progress of science has broken down regions, and China is no longer isolated 'within the four seas.' She is also industrializing, though much later than the Western world, but it is better late than never. It is not accurate to say that the West invaded the East. In fact, it was the modern that invaded the Middle Ages. To survive in the modern world, China must modernize."<sup>7</sup> The changes and developments in contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography are the best illustration of Chinese modernization. The depth and calmness of traditional Chinese culture have to a large extent dissolved the agitation and aggressiveness of modern culture. This is the wisdom of Chinese culture. Modern development has become steady because of the traditional meaning, and traditional culture has become quick and elastic because of the pace of modernization. The "quickness and elasticity" shown by this aspect of contemporary Chinese national folk dance is different from the relative openness of the contemporary classical Chinese dance system, to which it is related and which has a stronger color of integration. It is also different from the relatively more conservative and convention-oriented mature system of Chinese traditional opera theater, which developed through historical sedimentation and refinement.

Some people have suggested that the concepts of preservation and development should be introduced into national folk dance choreography, that is, placing unchanging preservation in opposition to unrestricted development. In my opinion, the concept of inheritance and development in Chinese national folk dance is a unique and effective method, which is not in conflict with conservation and development. It becomes a kind of axis between “protection” and “development,” stabilizing the contemporary development pathway of Chinese national folk dance choreography. Protection is the “root,” while creation is the colorful flowers and fruits that grow from the root. Therefore, in this axis we have to realize the core value of national folk dance choreography, while also allowing the range of fluctuation and expansion. Contemporary dance makers engaged in national folk dance choreography share the freedom and responsibility of “dancing with the shackles of cultural traditions.” In particular, the course and trajectory of foreign culture is not the only path we can choose. If we indulge in the arbitrariness of national folk dance choreography with a blind and irresponsible attitude, it will inevitably lead to the absence and extinction of traditional aesthetic qualities, leaving behind eternal regrets. In order to do this, creators of contemporary Chinese national folk dance need to be guided by cultural consciousness and reserve a pure space for the artist’s soul. By improving one’s own education level, one enhances the cultural taste of choreography. Through the continuation of the tradition of field research in folk contexts, one adheres to the roots and bones of national culture. Through debate and exchange, one enhances the digestion of foreign culture. The notion of “three closenesses”—being “close to reality, close to life, and close to the masses”—is a very simple insight for national folk dance choreography. If Chinese national folk dance is to become a representative national culture, it is necessary to take on the quality aesthetic genes of traditional culture in the “three closenesses” and form a stable mode of inheritance and evolution. This will allow one to avoid becoming a shooting star that only flashes for a moment in history. Feng Youlan writes,

The theory of “opposition is the movement of the Way” has had a great influence on the Chinese nation and has contributed greatly to its success in overcoming the many difficulties that it has encountered throughout its long history. This is because of their belief in this theory. They remained cautious even in times of prosperity and hopeful even in times of great danger.<sup>8</sup>

For better or for worse, art needs to continue to create a utopia for the human spirit. The development of contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography is a process full of crises and challenges but also one full of opportunities and achievements. For a traditional culture in the process of modernization in a complex environment, there is bound to be a huge gap that will lead to a certain degree of disorder. This phenomenon will not be fundamentally changed in the short term. The contemporary process of Chinese national folk dance choreography is also moving forward in twists and turns, and our thoughts are also being given voice in the collision. This is a very meaningful and vital pattern of contemporary existence. We need passion and contemplation, determination and patience. Tradition and modernity are bound to be the ultimate proposition entangling Chinese national folk dance choreography. Repeated debates are actually a process of filling cultural gaps and establishing cultural self-confidence. We are still in the midst of it.





## *Postscript*

This book is a revision of my doctoral dissertation, which I wrote under the tutelage of Mme Zi Huayun at the Chinese National Academy of Arts. For a long time, I felt that the work was not mature enough to share and thus put off the publication of this book for several years. After several revisions and hesitations, the time had changed, and if the “manuscript” was not released soon it would become old and yellow. So I gained the courage to publish, taking it as using a brick to attract jade (offering humble remarks to spark abler talk by others).

Contemporary Chinese national folk dance choreography is a big proposition but also an important element in the contemporary development of Chinese dance. This book takes a macroscopic perspective to examine this important but complex issue, which is quite difficult and challenging. The book emphasizes using the methodology of choreoecology. Although choreoecology has not yet achieved a systematic application, it has captured a few core research methods. This gives the study a foothold and meaning as innovation. In the process of writing the dissertation and this book, Mme Zi Huayun’s devoted guidance was not limited to academic training. It also included training in academic character and how to conduct oneself when doing research. Her assessment is encouraging—“systematically elucidates the complex aesthetic transformation of Chinese national folk dance choreography from the 1940s to the early 21st century, with a clear linear progression and in-depth analysis, and therefore has pioneering significance filling a gap in the discipline.” There is also a spur—“due to the author’s lack of practical experience, with a topic that has such a large time span and wide range of content, there are also some deficiencies.” The enormous guidance I received is more than I can sum up here.

In addition, the writing of this book has received a lot of selfless help and concern from many teachers and friends. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to them.

I would like to thank Mr. Ye Jin of the Chinese Dancers Association for providing a large number of illustrations during the finalization of this book. Nevertheless, there are still a small number of photographs whose authors could not be identified. If there are any omissions, please forgive us and let us know so that we can make up for them later.

Rui Xu  
August 2014

# Notes

## *Translator's Introduction*

1. Tang Simeng 唐思萌, "Di shisan jie 'Taolibe' zhongping 250 ge xiangmu jin qi zai Jing zhanshi" 第十三届桃李杯终评250个项目今起在京展示 [Thirteenth "Taoli cup" selects 250 works to be exhibited in Beijing starting today], *Beijing xinwen guangbo* 北京新闻广播 [Beijing News Broadcast], August 9, 2023; "Di shisan jie 'Taolibe' yuanman shouguan" 第十三届桃李杯圆满收官 [Thirteenth "Taoli cup" successfully concludes], *Wenlv zhi sheng* 文旅之声 [Voice of culture and tourism], August 17, 2023.

2. It has since expanded to include other universities. See Christopher Bannerman, "ArtsCross," ResCen Research Centre, Middlesex University, March 2021. <https://rescen.net/artscross/>

3. Emily Wilcox, fieldnotes from Xu Rui's class on dance criticism, Beijing Dance Academy, March 17, 2009. Notes written in Chinese, translated by the author.

4. For my scholarship on Chinese national folk dance, see Emily Wilcox, "Dancers Doing Fieldwork: Socialist Aesthetics and Bodily Experience in the People's Republic of China," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 17, no. 2 (2012): <http://jashm.press.uillinois.edu/17.2/wilcox.html>; Emily Wilcox, "Beyond Internal Orientalism: Dance and Nationality Discourse in the Early People's Republic of China, 1949–1954," *Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 2 (May 2016): 363–86; Emily Wilcox, "Foreword: A Manifesto for Demarginalization," in Shih-Ming Li Chang and Lynn Frederiksen, eds., *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond*, ix–xxiii (Wesleyan University Press, 2016); Emily Wilcox, "When Place Matters: Provincializing the 'Global,'" in Lorraine Nicholas and Geraldine Morris, eds. *Rethinking Dance History*, 2nd ed., 160–72 (Routledge, 2018); Emily Wilcox, "Dynamic Inheritance: Representative Works and the Authoring of Tradition in Chinese Dance," *Journal of Folklore Research* 55, no. 1 (2018): 77–112; Emily Wilcox, "The Postcolonial Blind Spot: Chinese Dance in the Era of Third World-ism, 1949–1965," *positions: asia critique* 26, no. 4 (2018): 781–815; Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (University of California Press, 2018); Emily Wilcox, "Joking after Rebellion: Performing Tibetan-Han

Relations in the Chinese Military Dance ‘Laundry Song’ (1964),” in Jason McGrath, Zhuoyi Wang, and Ping Zhu, eds., *Maoist Laughter*, 19–36 (Hong Kong University Press, 2019); Emily Wilcox, “Dance in Wartime China: Liang Lun’s Choreographic Migrations of the 1940s,” *Journal of Society for Dance Documentation and History* 52 (March 2019): 45–75; Emily Wilcox, “Locating Performance: Choe Seung-hui, East Asian Modernisms, and the Case for Area Knowledge in Dance Studies,” in Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider, eds., *The Futures of Dance Studies*, 505–22 (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019); Emily Wilcox, “Diasporic Moves: Sinophone Epistemology in the Choreography of Dai Ailian,” in Katherine Mezur and Emily Wilcox, eds., *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*, 115–34 (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Emily Wilcox, “When Folk Dance Was Radical: Cold War Yangge, World Youth Festivals, and Overseas Chinese Leftist Culture in the 1950s and 1960s,” *China Perspectives* 120, no. 1 (2020): 33–42; Emily Wilcox, “Concert Dance in Contemporary China: Crossing Borders while Maintaining Difference,” in Stephanie Burrige, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Dance in Asia and the Pacific: Platforms for Change*, 41–56 (Routledge India, 2021); Emily Wilcox, “Dance Props and the Rural Imaginary,” in Jennifer Altehenger and Denise Ho, eds., *Material Contradictions in Mao’s China*, 84–101 (University of Washington Press, 2022).

5. For a discussion of this, see Leigh Jenco, *Making the Political: Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 247.

## Introduction

1. Zi Huayun 资华筠 and Wang Ning 王宁, *Wudao shengtaixue daolun* 舞蹈生态学导论 [Introduction to choreoecology] (Wenhua chuban she, 1991), 28.

2. Translator’s note: This book was first published in Chinese in 2014. This statement refers to its originality within the Chinese-language scholarship at the time it was published.

3. Translator’s note: The author is referring here to the historical theory of “broken inheritance” widely accepted in Chinese-language dance scholarship. Namely, this theory argues that after the Song Dynasty, China’s early forms of classical dance were subsumed into musical theater and no longer existed as independently staged art forms. This view implies that only folk dance, not classical dance, was passed down in its complete form to contemporary generations. For more on this, see Emily Wilcox, “Han-Tang Zhongguo Gudianwu and the Problem of Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Dance: Sixty Years of Controversy,” *Asian Theater Journal* 29, no. 1 (2012): 206–32.

4. Translator’s note: “The people” (*renmin* 人民) has special meaning in Chinese communist ideology. It refers to the social groups thought to be agents of socialist revolution. Often, this focused on historically disenfranchised populations, such as

the rural poor, laborers, women, and minorities. See Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere, eds., *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (ANU and Verso, 2019).

5. Zi Huayun and Wang Ning, *Wudao shengtaixue daolun*, 32.

6. Feng Youlan 冯友兰, *Zhongguo zhexue jianzhi* 中国哲学简史 [A brief history of Chinese philosophy] (Xin shijie chubanshe, 2004).

## Chapter 1

1. Translator's note: This term refers to the research process in which artists visit rural areas to study local music or dance practices, often as part of the process for creating new choreography.

2. Translator's note: This example is from a famous exchange in the *Analects*.

3. Wang Kefen 王克芬, *Zhongguo wudao fazhanshi* 中国舞蹈发展史 [History of the development of dance in China] (Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2004), 52.

4. Yu Ping 于平, "Fengziliuyun: wudao wenhua yu wudao shenmei" 风姿流韵: 舞蹈文化与舞蹈审美 [Graceful bearing and flowing rhyme: dance culture and dance aesthetics] (*Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe*, 1999), 29.

5. Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell, "Folk Dance," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

6. Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell, "Character Dance," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

7. Craine and Mackrell, "Character Dance."

8. *Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu* 中国大百科全书 [Complete encyclopedia of China—music and dance volume] (*Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu chubanshe*, 1989).

9. Wang Kefen 王克芬, Liu Enbo 刘恩伯, and Xu Erchong 徐尔充, eds., *Zhongguo wudao cidian* 中国舞蹈词典 [China dance dictionary] (*Wenhua yishu chubanshe*, 1994).

10. Lü Yisheng 吕艺生, "Minjianwu zai xiandai shehui zhong—cong luoji jieding kan minjian wu de xiandai fazhan quxiang" 民间舞在现代社会中—从逻辑界定看民间舞的现代发展取向 [Folk dance in modern society: the modern developmental direction folk dance, as viewed from logic demarcation], in *Wen wu xiangrong—Beijing Wudao Xueyuan Zhongguo minzu minjian wu xi jiaoshi wenxuan* (Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2004).

11. Yu Ping 于平, *Wudao xingtaixue* 舞蹈形态学 [Dance morphology], Beijing Dance Academy, internal teaching materials, 63.

12. Yu Ping, *Wudao xingtaixue*, 108.

13. Yu Ping 于平, "Xin de zonghe: chuantong wudao de dangdai zouxing" 新的综合: 传统舞蹈的当代走向 [A new synthesis: contemporary trends in traditional dance], *Xin wenhua bao*, May 15, 1990.

14. Ming Wenjun 明文军, "Zai tan Zhongguo minjian wu de 'minzuxing'—

jiantan ‘duoyuanyitong’ de Zhonghua minzu minjian wu renshilun” 再谈中国民间舞的‘民族性’—兼谈‘多元一统’的中华民族民间舞认识论 [Further discussion of the national character of Chinese folk dance—simultaneously discuss the “unification of many elements” theory of Greater China folk dance], in *Wen wu xiangrong—Beijing Wudao Xueyuan Zhongguo minzu minjian wu xi jiaoshi wenxuan* (Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2004).

15. Ming Wenjun, “Zai tan Zhongguo minjian wu de ‘minzuxing.’”

16. “Wei ‘xueyuanpai’ Zhongguo minzu minjian wu zhengming” 为‘学院派’中国民族民间舞正名 [Rectifying “academy-style” Chinese national folk dance], in *Wen wu xiangrong—Beijing Wudao Xueyuan Zhongguo minzu minjian wu xi jiaoshi wenxuan* (Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2004).

17. Zi Huayun 资华筠 and Wang Ning 王宁 et al., *Wudao shengtaixue daolun* 舞蹈生态学导论 [Introduction to choreoecology] (Wenhua chubanshe, 1991), 1.

18. Zi Huayun 资华筠, “Wudao shengtaixue huimou” 《舞蹈生态学》回眸 [Looking back at *Choreoecology*], in *wu yi wu li* 舞艺 舞理 [Dance art, dance theory] (Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1998).

19. Zi Huayun, “Wudao shengtaixue huimou.”

20. English in original.

21. English in original.

22. English in original.

23. English in original.

24. English in original.

25. English in original.

26. Liao Yanfei 廖燕飞, “Minzu wenhua de chuancheng yu dangdai gaoxiao wudao jiaoyu” 民族文化的传承与当代高校舞蹈教育 [The inheritance of national dance culture and contemporary dance education], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 3 (2005).

## Chapter 2

1. Translator’s note: In this context, the term “border areas” refers to the Chinese Communist Party base area around Yan’an.

2. Translator’s note: *Yangge*, which literally means “rice sprout song,” is a form of northern Han rural folk performance. *Yangge* was the basis for a new wave of cultural production in the communist base areas that attempted to apply Mao’s message from the Yan’an “Talks” to create leftist political art grounded in folk culture. This became known as the *yangge* movement or the New *Yangge* movement.

3. Wang Kefen 王克芬 and Long Yinpei 隆荫培, eds., *Zhongguo jinxiandai wudao fazhan shi* 中国近现代舞蹈发展史 [History of the development of dance in modern and contemporary China] (Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1999), 108.

4. Translator’s note: The Long March was a historic trek westward across China

made by the communists retreating from nationalist attacks. It ended in 1935 in Yan'an, where the communists established their new base.

5. Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, *Zhongguo jinxiandai wudao fazhan shi*, 109.
6. Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, *Zhongguo jinxiandai wudao fazhan shi*, 110.
7. Wang Kefen 王克芬, Liu Enbo 刘恩伯, and Xu Erchong 徐尔充, eds., *Zhongguo wudao cidian* 中国舞蹈辞典 [Dictionary of Chinese dance] (Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1994).
8. Wu Xiaobang 吴晓邦, “Benzou zai jiefang qu de tudi shang” 奔走在解放区的土地上 [Running on the land of the liberated areas], *Wudao*, no. 2 (1980).
9. Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, *Zhongguo jinxiandai wudao fazhan shi*, 141.
10. Wu Xiaobang, “Benzou zai jiefang qu de tudi shang.”
11. Wang Kefen, Liu Enbo, and Xu Erchong, *Zhongguo wudao cidian*.
12. Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, *Zhongguo jinxiandai wudao fazhan shi*, 149.
13. Xia Yu 夏雨, “Women bu shi bozi” 我们不是跛子 [We are not cripples], *Wudao*, no. 1 (1958).
14. Tian Jing 田静, ed., *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxin* 中国舞蹈名作赏析 [Famous Chinese dance choreography appreciation] (Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 2002), 16.
15. Tian Jing, *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxin*, 15.
16. Tian Jing, *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxi*, 26.
17. Tian Jing, *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxi*, 45.
18. Leng Maohong 冷茂弘, “Yishu guilv yu duchuangxing” 艺术规律与独创性 [Artistic principles and innovation], *Wudao* 舞蹈 [Dance], no. 2 (1979).
19. Chen Qiao 陈翹 and Liu Xuanliang 刘选亮, “Mantan wudao dongzuo de tilian” 漫谈舞蹈动作的提炼 [Discussion on refining dance movements], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 3 (1984).
20. Zi Huayun 资华筠, ed., *Zhongguo wudao* 中国舞蹈 [Chinese dance] (Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1999), 123.
21. Zhang Shiling 张世龄, “Shibushi xingshi zhuyi de zuopin” 是不是形式主义的作品 [Is it a formalist work], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1958).
22. Translator’s note: Liberation refers to the founding of the PRC and the transformation of society under communist leadership.
23. Jiang Yaxiong 蒋亚雄, “Wo dui ‘Kongque wu’ de kanfa” 我对孔雀舞的看法 [My views on Peacock Dance], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1958).
24. Zhang Shiling, “Shibushi xingshi zhuyi de zuopin.”
25. Xia Yu, “Women bu shi bozi.”
26. Igor Moiseyev, *Lun minjian wudao* 论民间舞蹈 [On folk dance] (Yishu chubanshe, 1956).
27. Zi Huayun 资华筠, “Fanrong zhong de yousi” 繁荣中的忧思 [Troubled thoughts in prosperous times], *新华文摘* [Xinhua abstracts], no. 24 (2004).
28. Translator’s note: The Gang of Four were four Chinese political leaders



who were arrested in 1976 and held responsible for the Cultural Revolution. Their downfall signaled the end of Cultural Revolution.

29. Tian Jing, *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxin*, 125.

30. Gu Feng 谷风, “Xikan ‘Guandeng’ 喜看‘关灯’ [Enjoying Watching Lanterns], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 2 (1979).

31. Li Zhengkang 李正康, “Chunfeng dangyang xianhua nufang” 春风荡漾鲜花怒放 [Spring breeze ripples and flowers are in full bloom], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1979).

32. Liang Lun 梁伦, “Yao suqing ‘Sirenbang’ zai wudao meixue shang de liudu” 要肃清“四人帮”在舞蹈美学上的流毒 [Must eliminate the Gang of Four’s bad influence on dance aesthetics], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 1 (1979).

33. Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei, *Zhongguo jinxiandai dangdai wudao fazhan shi*, 347.

34. Wang Yuanlin 王元麟, “Hua niao yu chong pohuai shehuizhuyi jingji jichu ma” 花鸟鱼虫破坏社会主义经济基础吗 [Do flowers, birds, fish, and insects damage the socialist economic foundation], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 1 (1979).

35. Wang Manli 王曼力, “Shui—zhuming Daizu wudaojia Dao Meilan yanchu duwu” 水—著名傣族舞蹈家刀美兰演出独舞‘水’观后 [Water—after watching famous Dai dance artist Dao Meilan perform the solo *Water*], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1980).

36. Yang Guizhen 杨桂珍, “Shenghuo shi yishu de shengming mei shi wudao de linggan” 生活是艺术的生命 美是舞蹈的灵感 [Life is the vitality of art, beauty is the inspiration of dance], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1980).

37. Chen Guo 陈帼 and Shen Dicai 沈迪才, “‘Zhui yu’ kanhou” 追鱼’看后 [After watching *Catching Fish*], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1980).

38. Tian Jing, *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxin*.

39. Tian Jing, *Zhongguo wudao mingzuo shangxin*.

40. Sun Hongmu 孙红木, “Nuli fanying shidai de mei he qing” 努力反映时代的美和情 [Work hard to reflect the beauty and sentiment of the times], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 4 (1982).

41. Wu Lusheng 吴露生, “Canxiang fangfu pumian lai” 蚕乡芳馥扑面来 [Fragrance of silk country blows on one’s face], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 4 (1982).

42. Sun Hongmu 孙红木, “Zhuiqiu” 追求 [Pursuing], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 5 (1984).

43. Sun Hongmu, “Zhuiqiu.”

44. Yu Ping 于平, “Zhongguo xiandaiwu de zongti liucheng yu jiazhi quxiang” 中国现代舞的总体流程与价值取向 [The development path and value orientation of Chinese modern dance], 当代艺术思潮 [Intellectual currents in contemporary art], no. 1 (1987).

45. Ying Li 英力, “Wudao biandao yu minjian yishu” 舞蹈编导与民间艺术 [Dance choreography and folk art], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 2 (1980).

46. Zhao Guozhong 赵国政, “Cong cao bian nai xiang dao de” 从草变奶想到的 [Thoughts from straw turning into milk], *Wudao* [Dance], no. 3 (1980).
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