

UNLOCKING CULTURAL MEMORY: THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE NATIONAL DANCE OF CHINA

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The production of Chinese classical dance can not be detached from its cultural lineage, embedded in the nation's collective memory that is handed down through generations over thousands of years, nor it can thrive without constant improvement in academic training and exploration of different formats. If there is such a category as 'national dance', it must be Chinese Classical Dance. As part of the nation's cultural memory, Chinese classical philosophy and traditional aesthetics have a pivotal role in the creation of classical dance, while other important elements are scattered in different art categories and classical literature awaiting to be discovered, deciphered and invigorated.

Classical Dance as a Discipline

Chinese Classical Dance has been around for 60 years, during which time the genre kept exploring its identity in society and has achieved significant success in making an impact. What criteria, then, should we include in assessing whether the dance format fulfills its goals, and from what angle, be it academic development, folk dance, non-tangible cultural heritage, or from a political-cultural perspective? Who will be presiding over the evaluation?

Cultural studies have abounded with 'goal-oriented' arguments in recent years, implying that Chinese Classical Dance as a category will soon be doomed if it fails to achieve certain targets. But outside the dance circle, a diversified 'value-orientation' has quickly become a norm against a backdrop of globalization where regional cultures and value systems clash with each other. This also prompts the traditional dance format to adjust itself to different 'values'.

Chinese Classical Dance has made important contributions to the inheritance and dissemination of the country's cultural heritage by establishing an academic discipline for dance. From the start we knew our responsibility, as needed by our country, to fill in the blanks in academic training with the traditional folk dances, having to solve the



> The Chinese classical dance work *Ladies in Chang'an* of Beijing Dance Academy, won the first prize of the professional youth group of the 17th Beijing dance competition



1 > The Chinese classical dance work *Emperor Qin Reviewing Troops* of Beijing Dance Academy, choreographed by Chen Weiya. The dance adopts the vocabulary and creative techniques of Chinese classical dance, and uses the simple image of the terracotta warriors and horses of China's Qin Shihuang to show the heroic spirit of Chinese soldiers galloping on the battlefield and moving forward bravely

issues one by one, such as lack of teaching materials, the need for talent training, and having no original dance works to rehearse. We are now confident to say that the establishment of the dance discipline is one of our missions. Audiences welcomed the staging of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” and “Lotus Lantern” – two traditional dance performances – as witnessing the beginning of a new dance discipline, one that combines teaching, production and performance. Chinese Classical Dance continues to make progress in academic training, and in fulfilling its social obligations.


The genre is undeniably fit to claim the title of ‘national dance’, with a mission to introduce to the world the Chinese traditional dance. One important question, however, is how to establish a format that is consistent with the cultural identity of the country. In the composition of this dance discipline, different styles of physical movements, for example,

those of the Dunhuang and Han Tang Dynasties, coexist in the teaching, choreography and performance, but these styles all have one aim – to contribute to the creation of a Chinese dance form that is based on classic and folk culture, as well as traditional aesthetics.


Regarding measuring the progress in the discipline, people ascribe the current confusion to an obsession with new ‘value-orientations’, rather than building on traditional heritages. One strategy contributing to the progress of the genre is to draw on the experience of Western culture, and non-Western cultures for that matter. This should not compromise the efforts of returning to the classical works and inheriting old traditions.

In “Fan Dance”, “Calligraphy” and other works, certain techniques of the classical dances should not be forgotten – ‘lifting’ and ‘relaxing’ in breathing, ‘circular’ and ‘twisting’ in movements, ‘north-south’ and ‘Yin-

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SEP.
2019

1 > In 2019, the Chinese Classical Dance Department of Beijing Dance Academy went to Las Vegas, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle to participate in the "Trans Pacific China Art Festival" and the "Third Huaxing Art Festival" to perform *China in Dance*

Yang' in formation – elements that should be kept in creations, as with the 20th-century classic "Yellow River", which has been popular throughout the century and in the foreseeable future will remain important. Works like these are indispensable in training excellent classical dancers and producing remarkable pieces that can stand the test of time. A return to the traditional cultural roots guarantees the output of first-rate dancers, while also representing revitalizing the traditional culture and promoting the development of the discipline.

The History

Cultural memory is a nation's collective awareness of the past, an important source for the development of the Chinese Traditional Dance. The approach to the heritage was 'renaissance', rather than 'reconstruction', when we first started the dance discipline. 'Development' is the key.

As one of the world's four oldest civilizations, China survived clashes of culture with neighboring Asian nations and Western countries, emerging with an unbroken line of traditions. In the long course of history, events unfold and fade, reducing to memories recorded in both language and other forms. These carriers of culture work like a sieve, through which part of history is inevitably lost. The realities of history thus are often sought to no avail. The study of Chinese Classical Dance must touch on the true history, but in the same way must deal with the doubt of what is real. Returning to history is one important approach in the inheritance and reconstruction of traditional dance.

Historical facts exists in theatre, martial arts, images, literature and other forms of cultural memory, but they are incomplete and self-limited, subject to revision, damage or loss in circulation, leading to either a 'blank space' or 'hard-to-decode' memory. Images and literature, however, as 'physical objects' which have the possibility of being 'discovered' and



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1 > *The Slender Young Ladies in the Area 'Chu'*, a classic work of Chinese classical dance, choreographed by Sun Ying
 2 > *Tang Yin*, a Chinese classical dance work of Beijing Dance Academy
 3 > *Xie Gong Ji*, a Chinese classical dance work of Beijing Dance Academy
 4 > *Beckoning the Moon*, a Chinese classical dance work of Beijing Dance Academy



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'decoded', provide a rich body of sources that the dance genre could refer back to.

History should be viewed from a neutral perspective, but knowing the facts is not the sole aim here. Using historical facts as a base station to connect with other treasured excellent genes in the national cultural heritage is.

Chinese classical philosophy and aesthetic systems as parts of the cultural sediment are both real and presentable, existing in the depths of people's unconsciousness as a collective awareness and unifying tradition. In creating "Sorrows of Tongque Stage", artist Sun Ying pointed out that "we now rediscover classical dance in the Han Dynasty not for the reality reflected in the cultural and archaeological objects, but for the reality in the creative art instead". The classical Body Rhythm, Dunhuang, Hantang and other elements in traditional dances are not based on true historical events either, but are striving to reach authenticity in art creation. The dance "Roll Call by Qin Emperor" displays the strength of the Qin terracotta warriors through powerful body movements. "Yellow

River" is a concise expression of the nation's tradition. "Harmony Tune" returns to the ancient style of Chinese classical dance. "Dance Song" combines the classical style with folk dance. "Buddha" and "The Flying Fairy" recreate images from the ancient mythology.

We should approach history with honesty, draw from classic philosophy and aesthetics, and pave the way for the rebirth of Chinese traditional dances.

The truth of history may be hard to come by, but getting closer to it through reorganizing and reconstructing is possible. This requires going back to the historical context, making sense of the fragments with a contemporary aesthetic taste and innovation, and placing them in a broader cultural dimension. This approach enables the rediscovery of the classical 'rhythm' and 'essence', traditional elements that will again be eye-catching on stage in this new era.

Re-creation and innovation of ancient dances demands assiduous research using methods like dual or multiple evidence, to piece together

> A Dunhuang Dance work named *Feitian Changchou Ji*. The "Dunhuang Dance course" of Chinese classical dance is based on the images of Buddhist murals and Jiyue in different dynasties, extracts the most typical and representative dance gestures and images based on the ancient Dunhuang murals in Gansu, China, and makes an in-depth study on the route, force method and aesthetic norms formed, so as to create an artistic atmosphere of "people in painting" with static and dynamic combination. Starting with Dunhuang dance culture and body training, the course fully interprets the unique style and aesthetics of Dunhuang dance



1 > In 1961, opera experts were invited by Beijing dance school to teach for teachers of the teaching and research group of Chinese classical dance
2 > In 1982, Wang Peiying, a professor of Chinese classical dance, taught basic training courses to students

the broken fragments of historical materials. The approach to natural science, however, does not apply to dance, a humanistic discipline. Demands of a one-hundred-percent replication of the originals – as most scientific disciplines require – resembling that of an archaeological effort, would only cripple the re-establishment of the classical dance genre, as a complete restoration of historical facts is not possible.

Therefore, Chinese Classical Dances need ‘rejuvenation’, an effort that should include recreation of the originals, connecting missing pieces and empowering traditional elements, to reestablish the ancient dances as an independent dance genre.

Future Production

Chinese Classical Dance has been making progress in exploring its cultural values, both in the extension of Chinese traditions and in the inheritance of creative approaches within the discipline. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said: “You can’t step twice into the same river.” In the same way, many dance works written, rehearsed and revised in the 60 years of the discipline’s history are brand new dances that are bound to have new significance.

The traditional poetry, novels, mythology and legends, as well as

depictions from murals and historical texts, are all sources of inspiration for Chinese Classical Dance. “Drinking Alone with the Moon”, a dance work performed in the 11th Taoli Cup show, recreated the scene from an ancient poem, depicting a disillusioned Li Bai, a great poet from the Tang Dynasty, in an empty space epitomizing a feeling of forlornness. An adaptation of “Pink-Ink”, in 2016, combined elements from poetry, painting, literature and mythology. In the “Gua” section, the work emphasizes the passing of time and the circular display of space and strength, bringing them into a harmonious unity in a philosophical sense. It also stresses the combination of the spiritual and physical, Yin and Yang, from an aesthetic perspective.

This approach of ‘re-creation from original sources’ is an inexhaustible pool of inspiration for Chinese Classical Dances.

Regardless of the different of sources of inspiration for dance creatives, they all stem from the Chinese traditional culture. The continuation and expansion of tradition and value systems within the dance discipline is a starting point for the creation of more dance works.

New productions of dance works should be based on the discipline, with flexibility and a conducive interaction with academic training, conversely prompting training lectures that are more tradition-focused,





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- 1 > A dance section named *Liberation* in *Fen Mo*, a dance drama of the Department of Chinese classical dance of Beijing Dance Academy in 2016
 - 2 > A dance section named *Form and Formlessness* in *Fen Mo*, a dance drama of the Department of Chinese classical dance of Beijing Dance Academy in 2016

and achieving a higher level of creativity and performance. In addition, it is recommended that they break away from the fixed pattern of creativity, draw from traditional philosophy and tastes, but not be limited by them. It is also a good idea to make the production of dance works part of the training process for performers, connecting classes with stages, turning out dancers that are skilled in both acting and dance techniques.

The advance of Chinese Classical Dance will be achieved by tracing the facts of history, as well as by a modern interpretation of the classics.

In formats, we need to go back to the traditional culture, innovate aesthetic elements and expand the pool of ingredients that we could employ. Horizontally, the aesthetic ubiquity and rule of movements in calligraphy, painting, ancient tunes, traditional opera, martial arts and more, are worth exploring.

Imaginary and historical materials are employed to seek the truth in history. Instead of replicating, to recreate classics using logical deduction is a better approach.

In presenting the works, more than one style – realistic, emotional, romantic and impressionist – in multiple formats could be used, such as historical legends, literature and ancient dances. Symbols from Chinese operas, the colors and atmosphere in traditional painting, are all elements in creating a stage. Therefore, a modern creation based on tradition and classics is a good approach.

More effort should be put into establishing a widely-recognizable 'national dance', but we have made good progress in opening up the academic discipline, and developing a medley of creative approaches and formats.