

DIALOGUE WITH TRADITION, DEVELOP THE DISCIPLINE AND FACE THE WORLD

—CHEN XIANG, A SERIES OF TRADITIONAL FOLK YUE WU

Article / Gao Du

Pictures / Chinese Ethnic & Folk Dance Department, Beijing Dance Academy

I. The Origin of the *Chen Xiang* Series

Chen Xiang, a series of traditional folk Yue Wu, was launched by the Chinese National Folk Dance Department of Beijing Dance Academy in 2014. This Yue Wu gala, the fruit of a research project on the inheritance and development of traditional national Yue Wu, has evoked some repercussions in the field. *Chen Xiang* is culturally guided by the concept of “maintaining original aspiration, returning to and inheriting tradition”. It originally benefits from the advocacy of Deng Youling, vice president of Beijing Dance Academy, on the inheritance of Chinese folk dance culture, and she is acutely aware of the necessity and significance of ethnic culture inheritance. The series of *Chen Xiang* is based on Deng’s cultural guidance and advocacy and gained strong support from art creation practice project initiated by Beijing Dance Academy. Professor Gao Du (Former Director of Chinese National Folk Dance Department; currently, Director of the Academic Committee of the Beijing Dance Academy, chief expert of the National Dance Culture Research Base) is the General Director and Art Director of the series. Gao makes the plan and leads the young teachers of

the Department to form a production team, and the undergraduate students of the Department of the Academy are the dancers. Thanks to their work, the series is successfully released. The creative team, with Professor as the lead, adheres to the aspiration of protection and inheritance. They have successive launched the gala of the *Chen Xiang* Series in a continuous process of reflection and cultural introspection. Until now, *Chen Xiang* has been performed five times in succession and gained acclaim and love from the public. It has become a classical cultural brand to protect, inherit and disseminate Chinese traditional dance.

Since the *Chen Xiang* series was launched in 2014, a large number of precious traditional dances have been discovered during its execution. Such as, Tibetan dance-Qiangmu, Dongwang Guozhuang, Bailongzhuo, Zhongdayi, Xiegel Jiaxie; Yi dance, Da Ge, Paishou, Yanhe; Mongolian Sawuerdeng dance; Kazakh karajurha dance; Tujia dance, Tiaosang, Gunlong Lianxiang; Miao dance, Fanpai log drum, Caiqiao Lusheng, Manyuejiu; Uyghur dance, Nazilkum and Kuqa Sainaim; Han dance, Divine Drum dance in the Northeastern, Yingge, Haiyang Yangko, Jiangxi tea-



> Special performance of traditional Yue Wu collection of Beijing Dance Academy *Chen Xiang IV*'s poster



1

2

picking dance; Qiang dance, sheepskin drum dance and Duiyijiao; Korean agricultural dance; Xibe Belen dance; Pumi longtiao dance; Naxi dance, Dongba and Aili; Yao Lusheng long drum dance; Zhuang Niuwang dance; Lisu Achimugua dance and so on. The traditional dance in the *Chen Xiang* series is selected based on the following considerations: Firstly, it has to be the traditional folk dance originated from the people and inherited in the people's life, and it is still popular now but with a long history. Secondly, its creation from the people is provided with specific functions and objectives. Thirdly, in people's life, it is usually performed at particular festivals, ceremonies, or other events. Therefore, various types of dances mentioned above meet these conditions considered by the director. For example, Han's Divine Drum dance in the Northeastern is spread at Baiquan county, Qiqihaer, Heilongjiang province. The dance is performed by a Shaman at Tiaoshen (dancing to the god) ceremony. Wearing a dress with a waist bell and holding a single drum in one hand, the Shaman beats the drum while singing and dancing. Using the single drum and waist bell simultaneously, the spirit of the Shaman will integrate with that of the god. The dance presents confusion and madness of folk religion. Miao's Fanpai log drum dance is popular at Fanpai village, Taijiang county, Qiandongnan prefecture, Guizhou province. Fanpai village's log drum dance, a local sacrificial dance passed on from generation to generation, contains five parts, namely going out dance, mowing dance, stepping on insect dance, digging grave dance, and harvest dance. Tujia's "Saye Erhe" dance is popular at Yesanguan township, Badong county, Enshi prefecture, Hubei province. Also known as "jumping funeral dance" or "drumming funeral dance", it is danced to mourn for the deceased and also an important outlet for neighbors to express mutual help and friendship. Pumi's Longtiao dance is spread in Lanping county, Nujiang prefecture, Yunnan province. Longtiao dance is one of the traditional "jumping dance" of the Pumi nationality, also known as "Xi jumping dance". The dance has different formation changes such as "dragon getting out of water", "dragon going into the cave", "dragon rolling over", "dragon swinging tail", etc., which express the Pumi people's pursuit and aspiration for all that is beautiful. Mongolian Sawuerdeng dance is popular at Hejing county and Heshuo county, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous

Region. "Sawuerdeng" is the major dance of Oirat Tribe of Mongolian people in Xinjiang. Often performed during festivals, marriage, family feast and other recreational events, the dance shows strong nomadic flavor of life. Yi's Da Ge dance circulates at Weishan county, Dali prefecture, Yunnan province. "Da Ge" is called "Ouke" in Yi language and it is a group dance for entertainment. Dancers will tread on the ground rhythmically in the music of Lusheng (a traditional Chinese music instrument) and Chinese flute. As the saying goes, "upon hearing the music of Lusheng, people's legs will itch to dance; as soon as the flute blows, the tune will fly". The dance fully expresses the joys and sorrows of Yi people. All the traditional folk dance in the *Chen Xiang* series comes from people and their life. Every type of dance still exists in the festivals and rituals, plays their cultural functions and responsibilities, and symbolizes the rhythm of life. In its implementation process, various types of traditional folk Yue Wu have been taken on by many folk artists and inheritor who are "proficient in unique skills".

Preserving the tradition of "welcoming in and going global", *Chen Xiang* carries out study and survey in two ways. The first way is that the teachers of Chinese National Folk Dance Department lead some students to different regions. They go to the fields and the hometowns of the traditional Yue Wu and learn dance from the inheritors or folk artists mastering traditional dance skills. They also carry out interview, workshops and other research work in addition to learning dance. The second way is that folk artists or the inheritors mastering traditional dance skills are invited to Beijing and come to the class of Beijing Dance Academy. They then teach traditional folk dance to the students of the Department. At the same time, interviews and workshops are conducted with them. No matter what way being taken, *Chen Xiang* takes respecting traditional cultural prototypes as the key condition. The traditional cultural prototypes here refer to six aspects including the dance movements, scheduling, characters, clothing, tools, and music tones. In addition to ensuring these six aspects are consistent with its presentation in the folk, *Chen Xiang* also try to restore the scenes where traditional dance is performed in the folk. Of course, *Chen Xiang* is performed on the stage, the environment, aim, audience of the dance



has changed. Thus, the overall performance of the dance on the stage is slightly different from the traditional folk dance in the people.

II. The Cultural Value and Discipline Significance of the *Chen Xiang* Series

Chen Xiang is initiated to research and develop the inheritance of the national traditional Yue Wu. Aiming to protect and inherit Chinese national dance culture, it respects traditions and traces the original aspiration. In its purest form, *Chen Xiang* pays tribute to those great anonymous dancers all over the country, and interprets their true comprehension of the earth and life. "Tracing to the source water will be clear, trees with roots will be flourishing". The original folk dance, like one flower pedal of the *Chen Xiang* (the name of a traditional Chinese herb), get more fragrant with age. For thousands of years of development, China's vast soil has nurtured an endless splendid dance culture. With changes of times and evaluation of culture, a large amount of traditional Chinese folk dances faces cultural

difficulties such as disappearance, continuity gaps, transformation, etc. in the process of being marginalized and weakened. Thanks to the importance attached to and full support for the protection of the traditional Chinese culture by the country, Beijing Dance Academy, the only dance school of higher education in China, launches *Chen Xiang* project based on its coordination with various national culture protection and inheritance measures. With culture as its basis, *Chen Xiang* restores the cultural scenes of the dances and emphasizes on the presentation of artistic vision at the same time. It focuses on taking advantage of professional body movements to realize the protection and inheritance of traditional dance culture.

In modern times, the significance of the traditional folk dance lies in culture. The shocking power of regional culture and the appeal of ethnic emotions are strong enough to evoke feelings of the people. When we are wondering at the development of the folk dance, we cannot help but ask why the *Chen Xiang* series can continue so naturally? Because it seems

that we have found a route to inherit traditional Chinese folk culture and develop the discipline of Chinese folk dance with national sentiments and spirit as its core. It is not only about reviewing the tradition or a festive gala with local styles. More than that, it is a process of continuous discovery and reflection, and it is the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese folk dance in the national context where diverse nationalities integrate Chinese nation. *Chen Xiang* speaks that Chinese national folk dance roots in the past, comes from the people and their life. It keeps close to original culture in terms of formats, movements, affections, clothing, etc. to the greatest extent, and respects and highlights human and ecological cultures of the people in different regions. On our journey for advancement, it is fortunate that there exists live and original folk dance for us to trace and refer to when we look back. Based on traditional folk dance and with national spirit and sentiments as its cultural core, *Chen Xiang* undertakes the mission to protect and inherit cultures, and transfers from primary nature to artistic nature. Therefore, it provides a position for

1 > Tibetan dance *Xieger Jia Xie*
2 > Xinjiang Uyghur dance *Kuqa sainaim*

the development Chinese National folk dance and set up an example of national cultural aesthetics.

The launch of the *Chen Xiang* series is a thought on the discipline construction of the current Chinese national folk dance, a review of the developing direction and path of the discipline, and also a reflection and improvement on the cultivation of Chinese dance performers. During its execution process, every participant, be it teachers or students, benefits from the cultural power endowed by *Chen Xiang*. From the perspective of the discipline development, *Chen Xiang* is a route to develop Chinese



1



2



3

1 > Korean dance *Si Wu Yue*
2 > Xinjiang Uygur dance *Dolang Meshrep*
3 > *State*, a work in the series of *Beauty beyond Words*

national folk dance, and it takes restoring, respecting, protecting and inheriting traditions as its primary task. It has discovered, collected and sorted a large number of traditional folk Yue Wu resources. It will become precious resources and cultural support for the advancement of Chinese national folk dance. It is also the cultural foundation for Chinese folk dance to be regarded as a type of traditional Chinese dance. From the perspective of the teachers, during its execution process, *Chen Xiang* has provided a good platform for the teachers of the Chinese National Folk Dance Department to expand their vision, build expertise and improve capacity. Leading the students to implement *Chen Xiang*, the teachers, especially young ones, set an example by personally going from the “academic” classrooms to real “folk culture” together with the students. In the practice, they strengthen their belief that folk traditions are the foundation of professional development, which therefore is a cultural concept and route to continue the discipline development of Chinese national folk dance. From the perspective of the students, going to the birthplace of traditional dance and learning from dance inheritors in the classroom, are both precious chance for the students to experience unfamiliar, fresh, and highly different traditions. It is an invaluable experience for every participating student in their career. Nowadays, most of the professional dancers educated under the “academic” system have rarely actually been to “the

rural areas” to learn or experience traditional Yue Wu popular among the people. Traditional dance, source of Chinese national folk dance culture, is the most important cultural understanding aspect for the professional folk dancers to grow. Therefore, the implementation of *Chen Xiang* allows the students to have an opportunity to understand and experience traditional dance culture in their years of professional learning. It enables them to perceive pure national spirit and sentiments while mastering professional skills. It let them to interpret traditional culture with their professional bodies. Professional training and experiencing traditional dance culture work together to nurture the participants. During the process, traditions truly integrate with modern culture, and folk nature connects with professionalism. For the students, *Chen Xiang* gives them an opportunity to physically return to traditions and accumulate experience. It also brings them a mental growth and accumulation of experience.

III. Cultural Exhibition and Exchanges by the *Chen Xiang* Series

During the production process of *Chen Xiang*, the execution team has witnessed the cultural weightiness and strength of Chinese traditional dance and has been moved by the people’s persistence and passion for Chinese traditional culture. The young teachers of the Chinese National



> Tibetan dance *Dong Wang Guo Zhuang* This work shows that people wear Tibetan clothes, sit around the stove, eat Zamba made by themselves, drink butter tea, and then get up around the central column and jumping up to the Guo Zhuang with other Tibetans



1

Folk Dance Department who participant in the production of *Chen Xiang* play a composite of roles such as director, choreographer, teacher, student, etc. Facing the mission of protecting and inheriting culture directly, they have led the students to successfully fulfill the stage performance of traditional culture. Embracing respect to the traditional culture, and gratitude and reverence to the folk artists and inheritors, the production team of *Chen Xiang* engages in careful exploring and polishing so as to present real weightiness and emotion in *Chen Xiang*.

Since its very inception, the *Chen Xiang* Series has participated in various cultural and artistic exhibitions and exchange activities at home and abroad and won universal appraisal and preference from the people both inside and outside the field. On October 23, 2016, Chaoyang District Cultural Center invited all the Grade 2013 teachers and students of the Department to participant in the District's brand activity with One Family as its theme. The teachers and students took *Chen Xiang* to the community and disseminate traditional Chinese dance culture in the format of open class. In September 2018, the teachers and students of the Department brought some works of *Chen Xiang* to Austria for cultural exchanges and a performing tour in the Confucius Institute. They carried out traditional Chinese dance teaching and academic exchanges in addition to presenting traditional Chinese musical dance to the local people. From November 28 to December 2 2018, the teachers and students of the Department carried *Chen Xiang* to South China Normal University and School

of Dance of Xinghai Conservatory of Music for a performing tour and academic exchanges. Local audiences spoke highly of *Chen Xiang*. In June 2019, the teachers and students of the Department took *Chen Xiang* to three countries in Central and Eastern Europe for performing tours. During the folk art festivals in Romania, Slovenia, and Croatia, they had in-depth artistic exchanges and interactions with professional dance teams from Russia, Ukraine, Mexico and other countries. They demonstrated the charm and weightiness of traditional Chinese folk dance culture to nearly 50,000 audiences and gained positive acclaim and support from the local people.

The Chinese National Folk Dance Department of Beijing Dance Academy has always been upholding the cultural philosophy of taking tradition as the foundation, respecting and inheriting traditions. The Department achieves the construction and development of the discipline by way of "welcoming in and going global". Chinese national folk dance culture originates from people and their life. Only by taking from the people and returning it to the people can we truly realize "dancing for the people".