

THE “CHINIZATION” OF INTERNATIONAL STYLE BALLROOM DANCE

Article / Han Meiling

Picture / Department of International Style Ballroom
Dance, Beijing Dance Academy

A country has its own cultural memory, and an era has its own artistic accumulation. Over the past 30 years, the development of Chinese ballroom dance has been a story about the sharing of heterogeneous cultures and the exchange of values.

After 30 years of being, both artist and art should be in their prime. Let's follow the annually circulating rings of time and trace the last 30 years of development in China's ballroom dance scene through the lens of the flourishing and time-

honored Blackpool competition.

The Old Days

It is more appropriate to say that ballroom dance is a product of a high degree of athleticism and artistic expression rather than a walking-style dance between men and women. Since its introduction from Japan in the 1980s, the localization of ballroom dance in China has gone through an embryonic transition stage from the 1980s to the early 1990s, a robust growth period after the



1 > 2012 Graduation Party of International Standard Dance Department named *Variations of Youth*
2 > The modern duet *The Best Thing* won the first prize of modern duet in the 10th "Tao Li cup" competition

1 > The international standard dance work *Shi* won the 94th British black pool world team dance champion. Reflecting contemporary life with the action vocabulary of the national standard dance, interpreting the Chinese spirit, and letting the national standard dance art spread the oriental dance and Chinese cultural spirit with the greatest artistic charm seems to have become a highlight of the development of the national standard dance in this era





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1 > Modern group dance *Brothers* won the second prize of group dance in CBDF National Art Performance Dance Championship
2 > The representative play of the graduating class of 2014 international Standard Dance

1990s, and a diversified golden age from the mid to late 1990s to the present day.

In the early stage, ballroom dance was mainly judged via competitions. Dancers from all over the world used annual international competitions to measure their team's technical level and improve their skills.

In the middle (or critical) period, ballroom dance in China was mainly outward bound, with professional and amateur players going abroad to take part in such events as the annual UK Dance Championships and the Blackpool Dance Festival. Since then, China has produced a batch of star dancers, who dominate the domestic ballroom dancing scene and are increasingly receiving the global spotlight.

From the middle and late period to the present (AKA, the 'diversified development period'), ballroom dance focused on the integrated development of athletics and art. However, we have since found that as the development of world culture and art diversifies, ballroom dancing is no longer limited to the competitive arena. When works are interpreted through the visualization of characters, dancers are given a much broader space for artistic expression and performance. Ballroom dancing students, therefore, are no longer confined to the strict rituals of competition. They can instead bring their own interpretations to the stage and pioneer a new national standard.

Modern Ballroom Dance Development

("Q" represents the Dance Theater

magazine, while "A" represents Han Meiling, the author)

Q: Established in 1989, the Department of Ballroom Dance at the Beijing Dance Academy has a history stretching back 30 years. You have witnessed the whole journey, initially as one of the school's first generations of students and now as a front-line teacher. Please tell us about the work of the Ballroom Dance Department as the leader in the field of professional ballroom dance education.

A: As the country's top dance institution, we have long been exploring and making bold attempts to reform the teaching of ballroom dance — both in terms of competitive and artistic performances — by developing and creating artistic works that are rich in Chinese cultural and

educational elements. Generally speaking, our approach can be broken down into four areas: first, we provide students with a variety of colorful artistic practices; second, we pay attention to the integration of multiple cultures; third, we adhere to a balanced focus on technical and artistic performance in our teaching; and fourth, we continue to make bold innovations in the development of Chinese-style works.

Q: What are the benefits of artistic practice to the growth of students' actual skill level?

A: Artistic practice is very important in determining the development of dancers. Any art form that wants to maintain its vitality in the long term will find continuous research and artistic practice indispensable. In the training process, we

provide students with multiple artistic practice platforms and opportunities, via various channels. Students are encouraged to participate in these projects so that they can accurately understand and grasp the essential elements of ballroom dance, both through participating in competitions and creating original works. This also helps immerse the students in the genre, allowing their skills to develop quickly as they learn and create for themselves, thus boosting the effectiveness of rehearsal and enhancing their artistic expression.

Cultural Integration

Q: Why should we pay attention to the cultivation and refinement of cultural sensitivities in ballroom dancers?

A: Every time the music starts, the dancers on the competition floor try their best to attract the attention of the judges and the audience with their bodies and facial expressions. Dancers compete to have the most energy, speed, skill and overall technical ability, but physical strength and technique alone are not enough. In teaching, we pay more attention to ballroom dance's cultural and artistic functions. While delivering traditional moves, dancers can

employ acting techniques in a bid to communicate a sincere performance and enhance the attractiveness of their skills.

Exploration of Balanced Focus on Technical and Artistic Performance

Q: Is there a disconnect between technical and artistic performance?

A: The word 'disconnect' is not really applicable here as this is a phenomenon seen in all types of art. Reflecting contemporary life, interpreting Chinese philosophy and spreading oriental dance

1 > Latin duet *Farewell Cambridge* won the first prize of Latin duet in the 10th "Tao Li cup" competition
2 > *Silk Road*, an international standard dance work from the Affiliated Middle School of Beijing Dance Academy, won the Latin Group Dance championship at the 2018 Blackpool Dance Festival in the UK





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- 1 > The Latin group dance *Impression of Hutong* won the first prize of the 10th "Tao Li cup" and the second prize of group dance in the 10th National Dance Competition
- 2 > Experimental opera Modern Group Dance *Beautiful Legend*
- 3 > Modern dance class display

and culture have become a focus in the development of ballroom dance in recent times. The reason we put forward a 'two-pronged approach' (with a focus on both technique and artistry) is that we see the importance of the all-round development of students. Students are required not only to be technically excellent, but also to pay attention to internal development. The beauty of ballroom dance is not only what is presented on the stage. A greater appeal comes from the cultural nods it inherits from the dancers and their consequent far-reaching influence.

Bold Attempts at Chinese-Style Works

Q: China is promoting the integration of traditional culture and dance. Can the ballroom dance also express Chinese characteristics?

A: Of course, ballroom dance can use props, costumes and other external objects to more vividly

incorporate foreign elements into performances. For example, the modern dance work *Each Has Its Own Way*, created by Qi Zhifeng, a teacher from our department, uses bold makeup, fans, costumes and music with Chinese characteristics. The dance itself is made up of quick steps synonymous with modern dance, but with the integration of Chinese characteristics. This all required the participation of several professional choreographers as well as the full understanding and proper execution of professional dancers.

Q: What is the difference between an artistic performance and a competitive routine?

A: Artistic performances are woven through with rich storylines and characters, which require a higher-level of emotional skills from dancers. When it comes to the emotional expression of the characters, dancers first need to have certain logical and emotional responses themselves in order to

accurately depict the characters' feelings. They must then use artistic forms to interpret this in the aesthetics and rhythms of the dance. Traditional competitions require a higher level of technical skill, emphasizing adherence to the music and the accuracy of the style of dance. In order to meet the international development needs of ballroom dance, we have been advocating the idea of building on localization by paying attention to real life, breaking down stylized routines and combining traditional culture with ballroom dance to create new works.

Q: What have been the results of your department's teaching and performance?

A: Outstanding performances in the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th Tao Li Cup, as well as the Beijing Dance Competition and the National Dance Competition include: *Taiwan Strait Ballad*, *Dream in the Garden*, *Medicine*, *Red Rose and White Rose*, *Next Life*, and so on. In addition, in 2015, in



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1 > National standard dance art performance dance experimental play Latin group dance *search II*.
2 > International Standard Dance exhibition class – Latin dance II

order to commemorate the 70th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan, the 2012 graduating class staged a performance, *Variations of Youth*, around the theme of war. Another more recent example is the 2016 Latin-style group dance *Alive*, inspired by the Syrian war, which won second place in the World Group Dance Competition of the Blackpool Dance Festival in the UK. In 2019, *Soldier* won the modern group dance category at the Blackpool Dance Festival. We have never stopped making active and effective explorations into the localization of ballroom dance in our teaching practices.

Q: Is there any particular performance that you feel really represents your efforts to localize ballroom dance in China?

A: In 2015, to mark the 70th anniversary of the victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan, the

2012 graduating class presented a recital around the theme of “Variations of Youth”. Using Chinese history and culture as a backdrop, they employed the technical skills of ballroom dance to express the youthful vision of a better life in the war-torn era. The remarkable combination of Latin and modern dance, the bold attempts at Argentine tango, sailor dance and other elements, and the impressive shift between technical and artistic performance styles, were perfectly displayed in the routine.

Thoughts on Teaching: Sincerity First

Q: What have you learned over the decades teaching ballroom dance?

A: In every movement and expression, we guide students to pay attention to enhancing the creative force of culture and its impact on artistic vision. We

seek to guide the students to deeply and carefully analyze the characters in the works, as well as the intentions of choreographers and the cultural meanings behind them. By doing this, we hope to enhance our students’ emotional intelligence. We teach students not only the technical essentials of ballroom dance, but also a profound understanding of the essence of artistic performance.

Spiritual Enjoyment and Visual Impact

Q: What is the definition of a ‘good performance’ and how do you guide students towards this?

A: A ‘good’ work of art must enable the audience to enjoy both the audio-visual and spiritual aspects of the piece. A skilled and outstanding dancer not only needs to have superb technical ability, but also the ability to actively use their imagination

to impress their inner feelings onto artistic works. They need to accurately interpret the cultural meaning of the work with body language in order to resonate with the audience. We want to cultivate dancers who can closely connect with the art. Not only must they be artistically skilled, but also, more importantly, they must project positivity and enjoyment onto the audience.

Conclusion

Dance needs more than just dazzling skills to impress. The movements brought about in an emotional display from the depths of the heart are the most authentic and touching. Looking to the future, after the “Academy Cup” Ballroom Dance Competition, we will hold a meeting to discuss the continued exploration of combining culture and dance so that myriad foreign genres can really blossom and bear fruit in China.