

Research on the Development of Folk Dance from the Perspective of Dance Ecology—A Case Study of Uyghur Dance in the Hami Region

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ABSTRACT

"Dance ecology examines dance within a system of interconnections and interactions, providing a macro and multidimensional investigation to identify which natural or social factors influence and constrain dance. "This research explores the forms, media, and influencing factors that impact the occurrence and dissemination of Uyghur folk dance in the Hami region. Utilizing perspectives from disciplines such as cultural anthropology, history, folklore, religious studies, and ethnology, this study aims to provide vivid representations of dance and seeks to interpret the complex manifestations of dance, revealing the developmental laws inherent in folk dance. This paper discusses issues related to the development and transmission of folk dance under the lens of dance ecology, based on an investigation of Uyghur folk dance in Xinjiang's Hami region.

KEYWORDS

Dance Ecology; Hami Region; Uyghur; Folk Dance

1 Geographic and Ecological Context of Hami

Hami is located in eastern Xinjiang, bordering Outer Mongolia to the north, adjacent to Gansu to the east, with the Tianshan Mountains to the west and the Red Cliffs to the south. It spans the northern and southern regions of the Tianshan, characterized by a typical temperate continental arid climate. In examining the folk dance of the Hami region within this geographical and ecological context, it is essential to consider various factors such as historical culture, ethnic origins, and geographical domains, while also exploring the local characteristics from both natural and social environmental perspectives. This approach will help trace the developmental trajectory of Uyghur folk dance in the Hami region more clearly.

1.1 Historical Culture

In ancient times, Hami was referred to as Kunwu, later known as Yiw in the Han Dynasty and Yizhou during the Tang Dynasty. It serves as the eastern gateway of the Hexi Corridor and a significant northern hub of the Silk Road. Historically, it has been an important strategic location for border defense, with the government dispatching troops year after year for garrison duty and farming, leading to a considerable Han Chinese population due to traders moving in from the Central Plains. Hami is like a historical museum on the ancient Silk Road, showcasing a rich variety of

1 [Zi Huajun & Wang Ning, "Dance Ecology," Cultural and Artistic Publishing House, 2012, p. 8].

artifacts from the Sleepy Beauty found in the Five Fort Ancient Tombs to the renowned "Meeting of Maitreya" unearthed in the Tianshan Banfanggou, as well as ancient rock paintings and bronze Buddha statues, illustrating its historical legacy. Additionally, it is a multi-ethnic area where Uyghurs, Han people, Mongolians, Manchus, Hui people, and others have shaped this land's narrative. Before the Tang Dynasty, it was home to various ethnic groups, including the Wusun, Xiongnu, and Uighurs. The long-term interaction and integration among these diverse ethnic groups have resulted in a cultural art form that possesses both the characteristics of the Western Regions and the flavor of the Central Plains, creating a distinctive and splendid tapestry of multicultural art in Hami.

The historical and famous "Yizhou Music and Dance" has flourished in this fertile land. In the Tang Dynasty, the musical pieces known as "Daqu" were performed as songs and dances, with the Yizhou Daqu presented by the Xiliang Jiedushi in the Central Plains. After being organized and refined by the court's music and dance management, it became a beloved court music. Yizhou Daqu spread widely in Chang'an's (song and dance halls), tea houses, taverns, and public streets, reflected in Tang poetry that records: "What will old sorrows disperse, new songs of Yizhou are sung. It seems we won't hear them for many years, yet by time's end, our hair is turned white." This shows that Yizhou Daqu was once popular and prestigious in the capital, Chang'an. The basic structure of Yizhou Daqu consists of three parts: the prelude, the middle section, and the climax. This comprehensive performance form of song, music, and dance has not disappeared over thousands of years. Meanwhile, the musical structure of Hami's Muqam also consists of these three parts. The similarity of these two ancient musical structures across millennia is not a coincidence, indicating a possible intergenerational relationship between Hami Muqam and Yizhou Daqu. Although the original form of Yizhou music and dance cannot be discerned today, remnants can be sought in Hami Muqam, particularly within the rich shapes of ethnic folk dance in the Hami region. It is evident that primitive dance and Yizhou music and dance coexisted, highlighting that dance arises from life, connected closely to the era, ecological environment, production methods, and living habits. The transmission occurs directly within community social interactions, necessitating conditions such as the physical environment and specific performance spaces, such as religious rituals, festive ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. Especially in folk festival activities, novices learn to mimic dancers' expressions and body language, aligning with their aesthetic preferences. Gradually, they deepen their understanding and digestion of the dance, evolving it further.

According to this pattern, generations study and inherit these dances to the present day. They preserve the primary stylistic characteristics of primitive dance while integrating diverse forms and content over time. Thus, through diligent research and analysis, one can explore the charm and essence of ancient music and dance from existing folk dance references. Though archaeological gaps complicate the research landscape, exploring various empirical evidence with interdisciplinary materials may still illuminate promising paths forward.

1.2 Overview of dance

Any form of human art, during its formation, relies on labor and is affected by specific environments, leading to a unique social form shaped by local culture. The Hami region, where the dominant economic modes are animal husbandry and agriculture, shows that local dance is deeply influenced by agricultural and nomadic cultural production methods. This section will follow the development trajectory of dance in Hami, aiming to explore the local cultural manifestations and interpret the aesthetic preferences and cultural ideas of Uyghur folk dance.

The form and content of dance art are closely related to human production and life. In the dry climate of Hami, irrigation relies on melting snow and underground water, with many Uyghur people engaged in agriculture, leading to concentrated communities and prevalent, diverse leisure

activities. Hami's folk dances include over twenty forms, such as the Table Dance, Plate Dance, Horse Dance, Fire Dance, Chicken Dance, and Bowl Dance, which collectively reflect local beliefs, customs, and aspirations. Notably, the "Chicken Dance" features two individuals portraying a rooster and hen, with body movements imitating actions like pecking, crowing, flapping wings, and protecting chicks. This humorous and playful dance is beloved by the public and is a staple at weddings and festive celebrations.

During the Qing Dynasty, there was a "Lantern Dance" where dancers balanced earthen lamps on their heads, bearing nine wicks ignited during the performance. To prevent oil drips, dancers typically held wooden sticks to adjust the wicks, demonstrating complex upper body movements with rhythmic difficulty. Unfortunately, this Uyghur folk dance has become extinct. 'Lantern Dance' originates from Buddhist rituals, representing ancient reverence for fire and spirits. Various forms of fire worship exist in different traditions, and the Lantern Dance is a cultural product from Buddhism's heyday, with similar dances found in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and India. In ancient Kucha, a state in the western region of China, also featured a Lantern Dance. Meanwhile, modern ethnic groups in China, including Tibetans and Mongolians, retain complete Lantern Dance performances, with some areas incorporating "fire" as a prop in their dance.

Through a cursory analysis of Hami's historical culture and dance overview, we can confidently affirm that a nation's dance culture evolves with history and societal progress. The Uyghur folk dance in Hami reflects ongoing development in this ecological environment, embodying a special function that reveals the fundamental nature of society and explicating the complex dance phenomena that exist today. Particularly noteworthy is that Uyghur folk dance, deeply rooted in the public, preserves a relatively stable traditional style encompassing distinct characteristics of ethnic life, psychology, and rituals, allowing for mutual influence and complementary relations among different ethnic and religious cultural arts.

2 Contradictions in the Development of Uyghur Folk Dance

Currently, the demand for Uyghur folk dance in aspects such as "fitness and entertainment," "cultivating sentiment," and "spreading ideas" continues to rise, forming a natural basis for the flourishing of contemporary aesthetic awareness in folk dance. In modern societal currents, Uyghur folk dance faces inherent developmental contradictions. Discovering its significance and value from a comparative research perspective serves as an essential dimension in the exploration of the multi-dimensional space of Uyghur folk dance development.

2.1 The Neglect of Originality in Uyghur Folk Dance

A notable trend in the Hami region shows that Uyghur folk dances are becoming more staged. The local government and cultural tourism departments capitalize on artistic performances during various lucrative festivals, providing stage equipment for dance presentations. This includes organized artistic groups, dedicated inheritors, and spontaneously formed community performers. In essence, this performance format leads to a homogenization of Uyghur folk dance, risking the loss of distinct performance forms while developing simplified and formulaic routines that obscure the initial identity of folk dances.

The performance styles of Uyghur folk dances are diverse, offering strong self-entertainment traits, gradually appealing to a wider audience over time. To better showcase this unique art form, dance directors and performers started bringing it onto the stage, attempting professional arrangements to align more closely with modern audience aesthetic demands. While this pursuit of theatricality has promoted the dissemination and development of Uyghur folk dances to an extent,

it also presents challenges. For instance, in the quest for staged performances, the genesis of Uyghur folk dances has been overlooked. Many traditional dances have simplified or exaggerated movements to suit stage needs, often losing their original ecological essence. In addition, to augment visual impact, many performances have adopted modern costumes and props, starkly contrasting with traditional attire and instruments, leading to modifications in music and rhythm that dispel original traditional charm and characteristics.

In summary, the gradual modification of Uyghur folk dance elements such as music, costumes, and formations, as they adapt to performance arts, risks inducing a slow cultural transformation within Hami's folk dance context. Examining the performance trends among Uyghur folk dances indicates that the neglect of original characteristics stems from factors including: First, market demand and audience aesthetic preferences. Dance directors and performers may adapt and innovate according to market needs, often resulting in an oversight of original characteristics. Second, cultural awareness and a lack of understanding concerning the importance of traditional arts influence the choice of adaptations made during performance preparations. Lastly, the absence of specialized guidance and training results in "social products" formed by non-professionals negatively impacting the understanding and adaptation of the authentic essence of Uyghur folk dance, rendering it challenging to maintain its original characteristics.

2.2 The Neglect of Traditional Features in Uyghur Folk Dance

As a significant cultural expression in Hami, Uyghur dance possesses a rich historical heritage and unique artistic allure. However, rapid social advancements and cultural exchanges threaten to undermine its traditional essence. As recorded in historical documents, "The people here can sing and dance... They dance in numerous styles, balancing an oil bowl filled with fire, and throughout the dance, neither flame extinguishes nor oil spills over."² A comparison between this documented scene and the current practice of the oil lamp dance in Hami reveals distinctions in performance format, particularly in prop use. Former performances used a bowl filled with nine cotton wicks, while contemporary iterations generally feature a single wick under a bowl, now often made from modern porcelain rather than traditional clay—thus becoming a reflection of "realism" that sacrifices traditional integrity for reduced costs and increased accessibility.

Generally, traditional moves in the Uyghur oil lamp dance are complex, requiring extensive training and transmission to be mastered. These movements reflect the lifestyle and aesthetic tastes of Uyghur people while contributing significantly to their artistic expression. The ethnic costumes in Uyghur dance showcase unique artistic characteristics, encompassing numerous adornments. However, in pursuit of visual spectacle, many dance costumes incorporate modern design elements and materials, which, while enhancing visual appeal, strip away the authentic traditional appearance and cultural significance. Traditional music for Uyghur oil lamp dance typically incorporates indigenous instruments and melodies with a distinctive rhythm. Still, performances occasionally introduce non-traditional instrumentation and tunes. While this diversity enriches the performance, it can compromise traditional music's original character and the cultural depth essential to the dance.

Overall, as ecological and societal influences evolve, Uyghur folk dance remains dynamic, not static. Although adaptations occur amid a cultural evolving landscape, preservation of its innate characteristics and origins is crucial. We must encourage respect for the evolution of traditional attributes, enriching public understanding of their inherent value, sustaining a diverse coexistence of dance culture adeptly interwoven with local identities.

2 [Translated by Liu Hongliang: "Central Asian Exploration," Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1993].

3 Multi-Dimensional Space of Transmission for Uyghur Folk Dance

"Transmission is a necessary mechanism for a nation's arts and culture to exist, continue, and develop. It manifests both as a historical and contemporary phenomenon."³ In this context, interpreting folk dance transmission from an all-encompassing, multi-layered, and broad perspective allows for genuine engagement between traditions and contemporary mediums. Within different contexts, Uyghur folk dance appears increasingly diversified, recognizable, and functional in transmitting its multi-modal structures.

From a perspective centered on folk transmission, one scholar articulated in "Rural China": "In rural China, the bond connecting community groups chiefly hinges on kinship and locality; community activities are closely related to these ties. Such ties determine social standing beyond individual choice."⁴ As per my research, folk dance transmission in Hami predominantly relies on oral traditions from mentors and community exchanges, lacking a comprehensive transmission framework.

An interview with craftsman Maimaiti Tuoheti revealed: "In the 1950s, there were over a dozen amateur ensembles forming in Hami, but today, they have dwindled to sparse numbers. Previously, each village retained one or two performers of Uyghur dance; at large Maixilaif celebrations, they would come together, hone their skills, and give each other constructive feedback. Currently, however, few artists can perform complete dance segments." This decline in grassroots transmission practices over the past decades is concerning. Tuoheti, a dedicated teacher of the oil lamp dance, transitioned from ordinary performer to proficient instructor, creating stage works commonly addressing public life issues, receiving accolades. This transformation emphasizes the relationship between artistic mastery and community transmission, enriching and deepening collective interpretations of ethnic folk dance across generations. Prominent community celebrations, like various "Maixilaif" events, function as cultural "schools," nurturing community interactions while enhancing social understanding.

Thus, in many respects, folk transmission proves more significant than other academic strands, being grounded in reality, rooted in tradition, and drawing from shared experiences, compelling us to translate these from "ecological nature" into "contemporary awareness". Such oral transmission and community interactions are pivotal for research insights into the lineage of folk dances, illustrating the integral environment that nurtures traditional cultural engagement.

Consequently, the interplay between grassroots transmission and government-led ICH preservation efforts has rescued local folk dances from the brink of extinction, yet many issues require addressing. Theoretical direction, practical protection strategies, and interdisciplinary synergies are crucial in identifying viable transmission methods for ICH, mitigating the risk of a disconnect between research objectives and protective actions. However, changing ecological and societal norms have prompted many traditional folk dances in Hami to approach a state of decline. If preservation efforts don't materialize, these dances may become shards of our cultural memory.

4 Conclusion

Exploring Uyghur folk dance development in the context of dance ecology offers a profound understanding of the multidimensionality, uniqueness, and sustainability intrinsic to this culture. Its ecological context is not static or immutable; instead, it evolves amid migration, cultural fusion, and conflicts while fostering exchanges among diverse ethnicities, culminating in a dynamic folk culture

3 [Chen Xuefei, "Folk Dance," Xueyuan Publishing House, 2015, p. 187.]

4 [Fei Xiaotong, "Rural China," Commercial Press, 2012, pp. 72-78.]

ecosystem where mutual influence prevails. Grounded in the nexus of contemporary development, it is essential to prioritize the stylistic characteristics, performance forms, and cultural values of Uyghur folk dance, retaining musical, costume, and kinetic elements of traditional styles while creating frameworks for the protection and continuation of performers. Ultimately, from an authentic ecological perspective, aligning with contemporary ethos preserves the rich roots of Uyghur folk dance culture, while equipping researchers with rational interpretations of the multiple perspectives encompassing the survival of Chinese folk narratives.

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