

BEAUTY BEYOND WORDS · RE-STAGING CLASSICS

CHINESE ETHNIC & FOLK DANCE, DANCING WITH TIME

Article / Huang Yihua, Qian Jiayu

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

“Rooted deep in the fields and walking with time, originating from life and brought to the stage”: this is the brand new appearance of contemporary Chinese ethnic and folk dance. Throughout the 5000-year history of its evolution, China has accumulated a profound set of traditional values. The fertile soil of Chinese land has bred a diverse and splendid national culture, in which the modern Chinese ethnic and folk dances have benefited and grown from. “Based on the rich farming cultural elements of traditional folk dances, with the unique Chinese spirit and artistic concepts of the new era, contemporary stage creations are presented surrounding these central phenomena.” Therefore, contemporary Chinese ethnic and folk dance choreography has to trace the roots of our heritage while being conscious of nationalization and localization. This allows us to create artistic beauty in line with the times while pursuing personalization and modernity.

Since the founding of the Department of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance under the Beijing Dance Academy, we have upheld the belief that folk traditions are ‘living inheritances’. The department has long maintained the traditional practice of ‘Inviting (folk artists) In and Walking Out (to fields)’. The process of deep engagement in field research and learning



> *Folk Song* , a work submitted for appraisal and selection in the 13th Chinese Dance “Lotus Awards” . At The roof of the earth goes into the clouds, and the plateau sings around the ridge. The boy threw out the aged incense, and the girl bowed down to pray. Folk songs are like spring river water, praising the Centennial great Communist Party of China



from folk artists has largely facilitated the growth of Chinese ethnic and folk dances. In recent years, the department created a collection of traditional music and dance inheritance, known as *Chen Xiang*. In the process of learning and inheriting traditional music and dances, *Chen Xiang* series have laid a more solid foundation for the outreach and Development of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance creations.

In terms of choreography, the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department has always upheld the principle of delving deeply into traditions. The modern Chinese ethnic and folk dances are based on the native folk dances and culture, identifying representative elements and characteristics, then undergoing aesthetic and artistic processing. As such, they have become a dance form that can well represent the values and rich heritage of China, while moving forward with the aesthetic style of the times. This special cultural phenomenon of 'inheritance then development' can be said to be a product of time, benefiting from decades of the founding and development of unique Chinese dance disciplines. At the same time, under the supervision of an era, the unique value of its existence has gradually surfaced in today's world.

In order to better create with 'limitations', it is important to possess both a strong cultural foundation and a contemporary aesthetic vision. Since the establishment of the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department, we have been regularly exploring creations based on our rich and profound cultural resources from time to time. We seek to allow the charm of these excellent traditional cultures to bloom on stage, sharing emotions, touching senses and igniting tastes.

Pioneering and Founding -- from exploration to present traditions

Having walked through tough times and golden years, experiencing the relief from emotional repression and the revival of natural emotional appeals, and the recovery and outbursts of passion and ideals- the choreography of Chinese ethnic and folk dances has transited from cultural inheritance to expressing nationalism, targeting the innermost being and embodying idealism. As an educational department, Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department took over the baton of folk dance choreography in the 80s, placing itself in the role of an educator, rethinking the values of creation in education and aiming to explore the unique identity of Chinese folk dance creations in an 'academy style'. This means not only exploring means of creation, but also the ways in which tradition and dance creation can better serve education.

As a result, the first ever Chinese ethnic and folk dance show themed (*Xiang Wu Xiang Qing*) appeared, a collection deemed as 'the most representative and influential presentation of folk dance works locally'. "According to Dean Lv Yisheng, the structural organization of the show, coupled with selection of highlights from each piece, presented the best style, characteristic and skills of each ethnic dance form." In addition, the show also strived for a diversified presentation, designing sections based on their respective geographical location, with excellent classics such as *Fallen Spring (Can Chun)*, *I come from the Yellow River (An Cong Huang He Lai)*, *Daughter of the River (Nv Er He)*, *Sending off My Lover (Song Qing Lang)*, etc., being presented.

Firstly, the collection brought out the essence of Chinese ethnicity,



> Tibetan women's group dance *Resama*. These group dances show the comprehensive ability of musical instrument performance, prop technology and dance performance that professional folk dancers should have, which is the backtracking and sublimation of the traditional original flavor. This kind of live performance of Musical Dance Collection, is the most advanced and difficult, and gives the audience the most complete and three-dimensional feeling



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reflecting the richness and diversity of Chinese folk dances. Secondly, it“provided students with a platform to not just be trained in performance, also, deepen their understanding in dance creation, intellectual thinking and pursuit for the arts. Furthermore, building character and honing their holistic skills.”

As such, paving the road for the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department to groom all- rounded talents through opportunities in performance creation, and also reflected the importance of creation in Chinese folk dance education.The success of *Nostalgia of Home (Xiang Wu Xiang Qing)* has indeed paved the route for the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department to embark on in our mission to educate, to inherit, to innovate and to research.

With such a goals, Chinese folk dance choreographers are constantly trying various methods to better present traditions. For example, the dance show themed *Dedicated to Mom and Dad (Xian Gei An Die Niang)* was conscious of seeking for the roots of traditions, portraying strong nationalistic feelings and countryside flavors. The entire show transformed traditional folk dances and distinctive personalities from various regions

1 > The Korean women's group dance
Inky Tide
2 > Ethnic and folk dance *Red Coral*



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of the Han nationality into narrative and emotional dance language. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when China was opening up to the outside world and became exposed to the influence of Western culture, this form of creation reflected the unique Chinese character and national spirit, which has greatly triggered a sense of nationalism amongst in local folk dance creations.

With the continuous development of Chinese folk dance creations, pioneering and foundations settings of this kind are not only reflected in the beginning of ‘academic style’ creations, but are also regularly resurfacing with a new look from time to time. In 2009, *The 5th Golden Flower* dance drama was staged, becoming the first attempt ever since the establishment of the Department of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance, to transition from a collection of short dance repertoires to a full- length dance drama production. “Based on field research, Bai Dance provided the main movement elements, with the assistance of other Chinese ethnic dance dynamics. The first dance drama was acted and performed by the very students groomed under the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Discipline.”

From collections of dances to themed creations, and to the exploration of

dance drama, ‘academic style’ Chinese ethnic and folk dance creations stand firm in their commitment to create artistically, based on the roots of Chinese traditional culture. At the same time, paying close attention is paid to the importance of dance creation in education, thus, reflecting the value of ‘academic style’ creations in protecting the genes of traditions, in grooming talents, in honing artistic personalities and in academic research. Facing the traditions, we seek to protect and develop. Facing today’s era, we seek to succeed and prosper.

Exploration and Development -- In exploration to integrate traditions

In the face of rich and diverse dance styles with colourful cultural heritage, dance choreographers are passionate about deeply exploring the creations of their own preferences. With the accumulation of creative experiences, creations began to integrate traditions across different styles, whereby styles of creation diversify with personalized artistic inputs.

Dance choreographers seemed to be no longer contented with simply presenting traditions, but began to explore the means to present traditions through contemporary artistic expressions. Some of them



- 1 > Tibetan men's group dance *Androba*
- 2 > Han men's group dance *A Time of Peace and Prosperity*
- 3 > Han men's solo dance *The Drunken Memories*
- 4 > Korean group dance *Dong Kong Da*

turned their attention to the modus of high quality arts, some began to pay attention to hints of modern consciousness, focusing on expressing a character's inner world and spiritual emotions. Each breakthrough has at times spawned classic works. With the proliferation of dance competitions since the 1990s, a large number of excellent choreographers have emerged amongst educators from the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department. Their long-term commitment in the front line of teaching have pushed for creations of educational and academic value. The 'limitations' faced in 'academic style' creation have instead pushed for breakthrough in producing personalized classics.

In terms of 'modus of high quality arts', classic repertoire such as *A Piece of Green Leaf* is an example of which depicted a character's inner thoughts and pursuit in life through a contemporary outlook. Based on the dynamics of Jiaozhou Yangko, classic movements such as hugging fans, pushing fans and "8"-shaped fans forms the basis of movements.



With artistic input, movements transform into images of a green leaf floating in the wind. From this, we can comment on the possibility that Chinese folk dance creations can reach another degree in movement exploration, whereby boundaries of traditions do not ‘limit’, but open to ‘possibilities’. From this, we see light in academic exploration of Chinese folk dance creation, spearheaded by the very choreographer of the above- mentioned classic, Professor Gaodu, in his ‘Movement Analysis and Exploration’ academic module. Classics such as *Red Coral and Flight of the Peacock (Kong Que Fei Lai)*, also reflected artistic attempts to portray, to shape images and life through Chinese folk dance vocabulary. Thus, expanding space for expression.

In terms of the extension of creative themes, choreographers are exploring the ‘conversion’ of material into dance language to express a grand theme or a view into life. For example, *Eastern's Red* uses folk dance material of the Han nationality (Shandong Yangko) to portray the culture of the Yellow River and express the Chinese spirit. Unlike the usual display of folk style, the artistry of the dance heightened to reflect a sense of social cohesion. Shandong Guzi Yangko's ‘stable, solid, strong and tenacious’ style portrays the tenacity and strength of Chinese men. On another hand, Jiaozhou Yangko's “twist, grind, stretch and tough” and “ twisted waist” aesthetic styles reflect women’s strong and determined character beneath their delicate and feminine looks. Therefore, folk dance language turns into a symbolism of Chinese spirit.

‘Rustic yet elegant’ traits seen in *Old Partner* also found another possible path in Chinese folk dance creation through the images of daily life. Via the humorous yet relaxing dance style, the dance depicts sincere emotions of an aged couple. This seems to relate the ‘rustic’ characteristic of folk dance into contemporary life, portraying the beauty of human emotions and painting a picture of ‘till death do us apart’. Conveyed in folk language, yet bringing us closer to the beauty in the simplicity of life.

There are many other classic creations, such as *Spine of Fan* that portrays the toughness of ethnic Korean women, *How Could the Flower Be So Red?* which reflected inner thoughts of women, and many more. The continuous pursuit for integration of traditions and contemporary view is prevalent in our explorations in content expression.

Openness and Inclusiveness -- In exploration to retrace traditions

In 2014, traditional folk music and dance collection Chen Xiang embarked on the mission to promote inheritance and stimulate consciousness in folk dance practitioners to protect folk dance heritage. Therefore, not merely just creating for the academic stage, but to both create for artistic stages and purpose of inheritance. As such, *Beauty beyond Words (Da Mei Bu Yan)*, a corresponding platform for artistic exploration, was created. It is precisely due to the efforts of *Chen*



> Mongolian men's group dance *Cavalry General*



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1 > Tibetan men's group dance *Androba*
2 > Chinese Ethnic & Folk Dance
Department's traditional musical
dance collection performance *Beauty
beyond Words*

Xiang which allowed choreographers to better grasp the foundation of folk dances, and thus opening up paths to “liberate” tradition transformations. Under the influence of contemporary concepts, creation of Chinese folk dance is liberated and became more inclusive. At the same time, with voices from the new era to spur inheritance and cultural awareness, creators retrace the roots of traditions and draw creativity from the profound values of traditions. The “academy style” creation stand firm on our ideology that with an unwavering principle and diversified methods of creation, steady progress can be made in the pursuit for artistic expression.

The rich accumulation of experience in converting folk dance materials into dance language allowed for a more diversified choice of theme, spanning from political discourse, revealing human's spiritual appearance or emotional depiction, etc. From macro to micro, from ‘rustic’ to ‘elegant’, from lyrical to narrative... The boundaries for expression in Chinese folk dance is constantly expanding with the continuous enrichment of folk dance language.

In order to strengthen dance language and diversify methods of expression, there is a constant search for a balance between traditions and artistic expression. In dance repertoire *Waters of Huai, Like Bends of Her (Huai Shui Qing Lan Hua Wan)* the ‘run far and halt fast’ traditional

folk dance style of Anhui Huagu Deng (a form of folk arts from Anhui comprising of acting, dancing and music) in the flow of movements was “activated” to create a smooth picture in formations. Like the constant flow of River Huai, or the constant effort of folk dance practitioners tracing the roots of heritage. In the merging of modern art creation techniques and folk dance materials, the dance language is given multiple layers of semantics- from picture to image to connotation, yet again embodying its main purpose- to constantly be in the path to explore. This, could then be a way for creations to adapt well to contemporary artistry while retracing the footsteps to tradition's core value.

Retracing traditions, is a manifestation of absorbing traditional ‘nutrients’ in the new era. The contemporary presentation of music and dance is actually based on the continuation of ancient art forms where songs, music and dance are presented together. As such, to seek for breakthrough in traditional forms, sense of presence in artistic experiences could be strengthened and explored.

For example, dance repertoire *Strumming Heartstrings (Xin Xian)* is an example of combination of music and dance in artistic presentation. At the beginning of the dance, the musician and dancer occupy separate spaces on the stage, with the dancer only dancing at a fixed point.



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The dance choreography and live music performance brought out the psychological world of a woman, whereby the Pipa music also sounded the inner whispers of a woman. At the climax, the two independent spaces merge when the dancer starts to dance around the musician. The change in the dancer's movement in space not only bring by changes in the form, but also in content. The choreographer narrates her inner pursuit for longing through the choreography. In this work, the dancer still assumes the role of a dancer, the musician still performs her music, but with creative designing, the choreographer created a space to convey ideologies.

Drumming and dancing, combined with live singing, *Dance with the Sound of Strings and Drums*(*Xuan Yin Gu Wu*) depicted the vivid life of Tibetan folks. While *Sun Yong* was created through the fusion of traditional North- Korean drum and dance. With a live flute

accompaniment, it provides a visual experience of the collision between traditional music and dancing. Through this creation, the choreographer created endless vitality and 'eye- satisfaction' in the modern aesthetics presented, by developing the traditional music and dance of the Chinese North Korean ethnicity.

The openness and inclusiveness of the new era has provided a wider space for creation. With a strong 'foundation' of traditions, 'academic style' Chinese folk dance creations strive for constant breakthroughs in creation. In the pursuit of higher artistry, it is important to retrace and pay our sincerest respect to traditions.

Conclusion

"Beauty beyond words, Re-staging Classics" - Chinese ethnic and

folk dances dance with time with the nourishment from traditions. Giving kudos to the broad foundation of traditional culture and values, 'academic style' creations have developed over the years, bringing about growth in education, inheritance, creation and research work. By casting traditions in the limelight, the explorations in creation have allowed our Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Department educators to retrace traditions while understanding their identity in the present world. Their consciousness, understanding, education and deepening research into the traditional arts field have brought about many creative innovations.

As an educational institution, we are determined to carry forward the flame of traditional arts and culture, through education, through creations and through stage performances. This way, we can play our part in preserving this infinite form of beauty for centuries to come.

1 > Teachers of Chinese Ethnic & Folk Dance Department and the folk band play *The clang of gongs and drums*. These teachers also use percussion accompaniment in their daily teaching. In this party, all folk dance teachers and band members presented a beautiful audio-visual feast together