

Research on the aesthetic characteristics and contemporary reproduction of Chu dance from the perspective of Multicultural Paradox

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Abstract

Chu dance, a treasure of ancient Chinese art, holds a unique place in dance history and is key to Chu studies. In ancient times, influenced by diverse music and dance cultures, Chu dance developed three major aesthetic features: lightness and heaviness, complexity and simplicity, and the "long sleeves, slender waist, and twisting body" style. In modern times, against a backdrop of globalization, the revival of traditional Chinese culture, and the application of modern technology, dance creators have begun to revive and innovate Chu dance. Using the works "Chu Waist", "Nine Songs", and "Ji Chu" as examples, this paper explores three contemporary Chu dance creation paths: "museum - style aesthetic presentation", "spiritual translation in cross - cultural contexts", and "activation and reappearance of regional cultural resources", reflecting on them. It reveals the challenges Chu dance innovation faces due to limited historical materials, the need to balance tradition and innovation, and proposes suggestions for improving Chu dance talent training mechanisms to guide future research and practice.

1. Defination and Research Framework

The so-called "Chu Dance" refers to a comprehensive cultural and artistic form that originated in the Chu region during China's pre-Qin period (the territory of the ancient Chu State), flourished during the Qin and Han dynasties, and was prevalent in the Jing-Chu area and its neighboring regions (primarily present-day Hubei, Hunan, and northern Jiangxi). It served both religious sacrificial and entertainment purposes, encompassing various forms such as shamanic dance, court dance, drum dance, civil dance, and martial dance. Historical records like the Zuo Zhuan, Records of the Grand Historian, and Songs of Chu, along with excavated artifacts such as murals and dancing figurines from Chu tombs, attest to the widespread popularity of Chu Dance during its time and its profound influence on the aesthetic preferences of the entire era.

However, with historical developments, the decline of Chu culture and the shift of political centers led to the gradual disappearance of the original form of Chu Dance from mainstream view, resulting in a rupture in its historical transmission chain and the loss of its cultural transmission context. This rupture and loss have given rise to a dual manifestation of "Chu Dance" in contemporary discourse: on one hand, there is the "ancient Chu Dance" — the original form verifiable through archaeological and textual evidence, embedded in specific historical contexts

and cultural functions; on the other hand, there is the "modern Chu Dance"—stage-based works reconstructed by contemporary creators using historical elements, such as Slender Waist and Nine Songs. Although both share "Chu cultural symbols," their fundamental differences in temporal contexts (the former serving as a vehicle for rituals/sacrificial ceremonies, the latter as an object of artistic creation) create distinct divisions in function and form.

This paper will explore the generative logic of Chu Dance's aesthetic characteristics from the dialectical relationship between rupture and continuity, as well as its contemporary reconstruction paths and theoretical challenges within a multicultural context. The research framework is listed in figure 1.

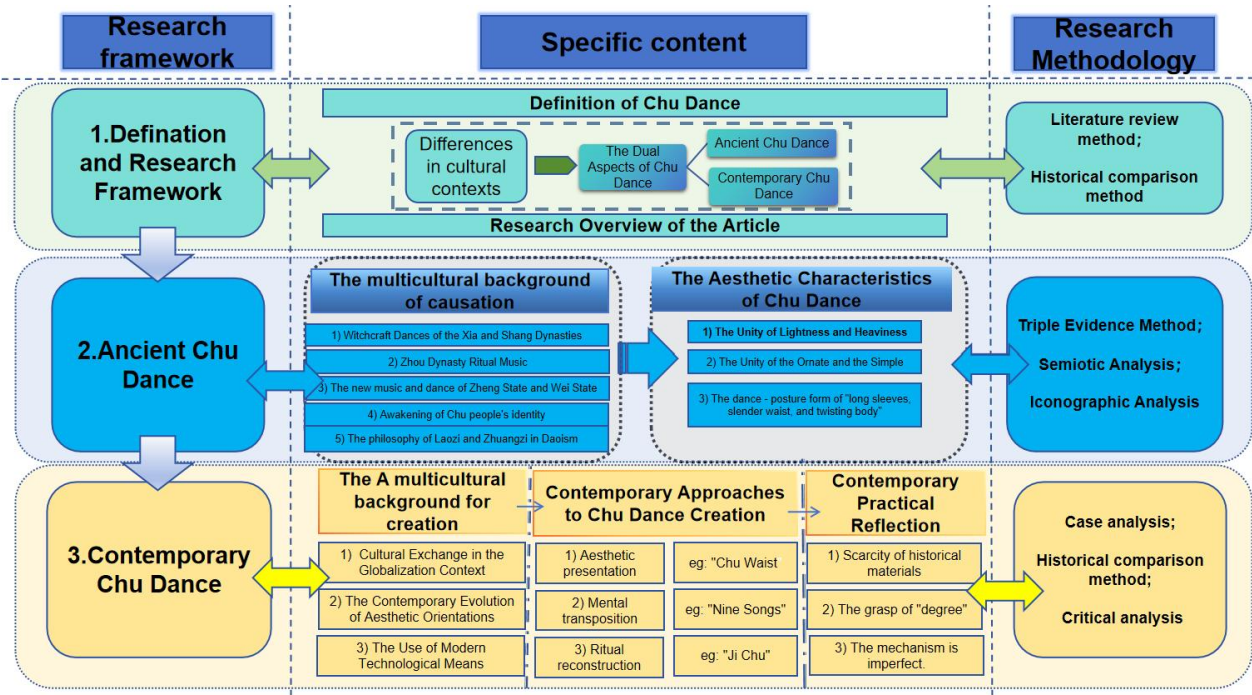


Figure 1: research framework

2. Ancient Chu dance

As a distinct dance style, "Chu Dance" formally emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. During this era, the Zhou royal court declined, feudal lords vied for supremacy, and society underwent immense turbulence and transformation. Yet, as the saying goes, "historians' misfortune is poets' fortune"—this chaotic social landscape not only fostered the intellectual and cultural phenomenon of the "Hundred Schools of Thought contending," but also provided fertile ground for the birth and development of Chu Dance. As dance is an art form centered on human movement, characterized by ephemerality, dynamism, and performativity, the limitations of the era now prevent us from fully reconstructing the original form of ancient Chu Dance. Nevertheless, Chu Dance has been deeply ingrained in the kinesthetic DNA of the Chu people, and glimpses of its splendor persist in modern folk dances of the Chu region, as well as in surviving artifacts and historical records.

In this section, the author employs the "threefold evidence method" of historical research—integrating artifacts, textual sources, and remnants of Chu folk dances—to outline the formative causes and aesthetic characteristics of Chu Dance from a multicultural perspective.

2.1 The multicultural background of the Chu Dance formation

The State of Chu (1042–223 BCE) was primarily located in the middle reaches of the

Yangtze River (present-day Hunan, Hubei, and northern Jiangxi), a region crisscrossed by rivers. This geographical environment not only fostered the unique "aquatic culture" of Chu but also facilitated economic and cultural exchanges across the territory. As scholar Du Peng notes, "Chu Dance was conceived within Chu culture and evolved through interactions in a multicultural environment characterized by shared ideas and consciousness, ultimately forming an artistic synthesis that blended the Central Plains culture with the cultural traditions of the middle Yangtze River basin"(Du,2015).Amid the collision and exchange of diverse cultures, the Chu people awakened to a distinct identity consciousness. By selectively integrating the strengths of various musical and dance traditions, they revitalized these art forms on the land of Jing-Chu, giving rise to a uniquely regional and innovative dance style that embodied both historical continuity and fresh vitality.

2.1.1 The legacy of the witch dance in the Xia and Shang dynasties creates a mysterious Atmosphere

The most renowned dance of the State of Chu was the witch dance, which was passed down from the Xia and Shang dynasties. So-called "witch dance" was an important component and means of expression of ancient Chinese primitive religious rituals. It was born in primitive witchistic sacrificial activities. From ancient times through the Xia and Shang dynasties, female witches and male witch doctors communicated with the gods through dance to pray for safety. Moreover, dancers had extremely high status, such as Shen Nong, Yu the Great, and King Tang of Shang, who were all famous great witches. During witch dance performances, a special form was often used to achieve a "supernatural state" of the body that was distinct from everyday life, thus connecting heaven and earth and linking with ghosts and spirits, which also created its mysterious and terrifying atmosphere.

From the Xia and Shang dynasties into the Western Zhou period, the Western Zhou royal family's emphasis on ritual systems caused witchism's status to decline. However, in the State of Chu, it wasn't affected by the emphasis on ritual systems. At this time, the influence of the Xia and Shang "witchic ways" on Chu Dance became more profound. The famous Warring States poet Qu Yuan's "Nine Songs" was also created based on the Chu folk sacrificial music and dances (in ancient China, poetry, music, and dance were integrated). Wang Yi of the Han dynasty wrote in his "Chu Ci Zhang Ju": "In the southern city of Ying in the State of Chu, between the Yuan and Xiang rivers, the local customs believed in ghosts and enjoyed sacrifices. They would create songs, music, and dances to please the various gods" (Wang,2017) . So, we can see how prevalent witchic - style songs and dances were in the State of Chu.

2.1.2The Simple and Plain Style of Zhou Ritual Music and Dance

The unique geographical location made the interaction between Chu and the Central Plains more frequent and convenient. The Western Zhou's "ritual and music system" emphasized the aesthetic characteristics of music and dance being "joyful but not excessive, sorrowful but not hurtful." This simple and elegant ritual music also influenced Chu Dance.

After the fall of the Xia Dynasty, although the Zhou Dynasty regarded the Chu people as barbarians, the State of Chu had always been "respect the Zhou Dynasty as the original Xia Dynasty": Chu was enfeoffed during the reign of King Cheng of Zhou, and served the Zhou royal family humbly, with "Do not cross the line" (Yang,1990) . Later, the Chu people, "hibernating between the Ji and Jing Mountains, began to show their sharpness"(zhang,1995) ,and by the reign of King Mu of Zhou, "the king led the Chu marquis to attack the Xu Rong"(Zhang,2003) .During the reign of King Yi of Zhou, Chu claimed, "I am a barbarian, and do not use the Central Plains title"(Si,1959) .In the reign of King Li of Zhou, Chu "feared his attack on Chu, and also gave up its king" (Si,1959). Behind the unpredictable relationship between the Zhou and Chu, there was

the complex psychological journey of the Chu people: the weak State of Chu was determined to "respect the Zhou Dynasty as the original Xia Dynasty" , but was regarded as a barbarian by the Zhou royal family. So it strove to make progress, and after becoming powerful, it still longed for recognition as orthodox. "This identity consciousness and 'orthodox' complex prompted Chu Dance to retain the simple and elegant style of Zhou ritual music while abandoning tradition" (Zhang,2021),adding a simple and unadorned style to its luxurious and mysterious style.

2.1.3The New and Ingenious Skills Brought by the New Sounds of Zheng and Wei

Chu Dance contains the remnants of Chu's witch dance, is influenced by Central Plains' elegant court dance, and is also affected by the music and dance of surrounding areas, especially the states of Zheng and Wei. Since the regions governed by Zheng and Wei had many descendants of merchants, the popular music there, though from the countryside, included the soft and decadent sounds of the Shang royal court that led to the dynasty's downfall. "Decadent" implies weakness and decline, indicating that the Shang royal court's dances had a light physical quality and body language conveying romantic messages. Therefore, the music and dance of Zheng and Wei were pursued by the pleasure - seeking classes of various vassal states, and Chu was no exception. From the description in "Chu Ci · Zhao Hun" of the Zheng dance performed in the Chu palace, with phrases like "Swinging the front of a garment is like the swaying and crossing of bamboo branches" , "Bend over and clap their hands" , and "Enchanting women"(Zhu,2001).

2.1.4 Identity Awakening Amidst Diverse Music and Dance Cultures

Under the stimulation of multiple cultures of music and dance, the people of Chu did not lose their identity amidst the impact but achieved the integration of their music and dance culture by relying on the unique geographical environment and totem worship culture of the Chu region. The water network in the Jiangnan Basin is densely spread, and the Chu people who lived by the water formed a unique "water-veneration culture" over a long period of reproduction: In "Zuo Zhuan, Ai Gong's sixth year," there is a preference for "water" in the sacrifices of the Chu state ruler for rivers and mountains; among literati and poets, there is no stinginess in praising water, for example, Qu Yuan's "Nine Songs" includes three pieces, "Xiang Jun," "Xiang Furen," and "He Bo," which are sacrifices to the water gods, indicating the importance of water to the Chu people through the proportion of their length. The natural environment and cultural context of the Chu region made the cultural symbol of "water" naturally become a symbol that distinguishes Chu Dance from others, and made the image of water frequently appear in Chu Dance. Such as the dance postures and styles described in ancient documents, such as "Lianquan" and "Sleeve Long," and the performance styles of "Weiyi" and "Feihu," are all simulations of the flowing curves of water and the imagery of rippling water waves.

"wind-veneration culture" is also an important characteristic of Chu culture, with its spiritual origin coming from the ancestor of the Chu people—Zhu Rong. They regarded Zhu Rong as a phoenix and thus adopted the phoenix as their national totem. Among the many cultural relics unearthed in the Chu region, the image of the "phoenix bird" frequently appears. For example, in the "Silk Painting of Dragon and Phoenix Figures" (See Figure 2) unearthed from a Chu tomb in Changsha, the imagery of the phoenix bird guiding souls to ascend to heaven is concretized in dance as the dynamic posture of "slender waist and long sleeves." This "wind - veneration culture" gives Chu Dance an aesthetic of "body like a swimming dragon, sleeves like startled swans."

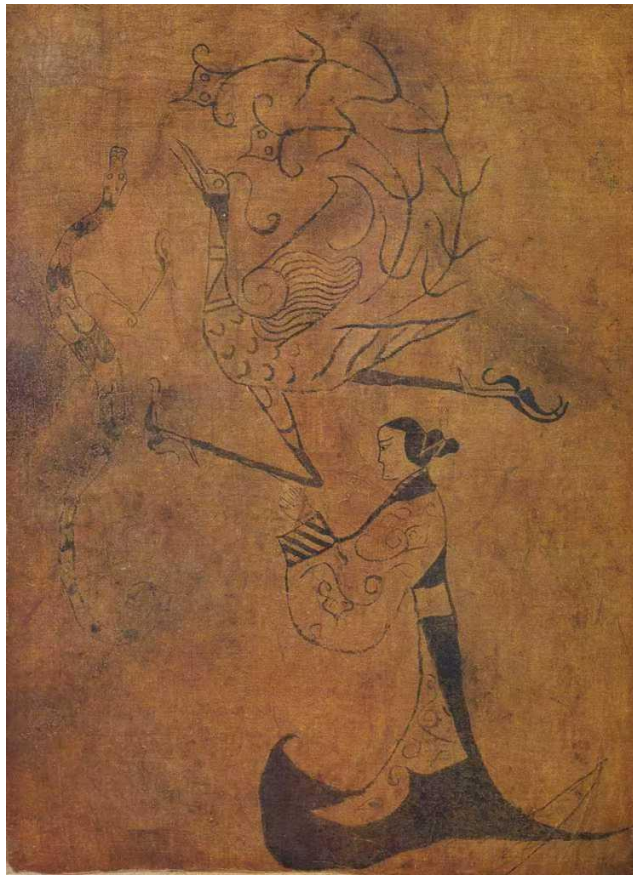


Figure 2: The "Silk Painting of a Figure with a Dragon and Phoenix" unearthed from a Chu tomb in Changsha, Hunan.

The Chu Dance, through its characteristics of "water-veneration cultur" and "wind-veneration culture", has integrated the "mysterious" legacy of the Xia and Shang dynasty witchic dances, the "elegant and proper" orthodoxy of the Zhou dynasty, and the "innovative and clever" new sounds of Zheng and Wei into the fluid movements and the dynamic postures of "floating and soaring" like clouds in motion. For instance, the lacquer box with a pair of mandarin ducks depicting music and dance scenes, unearthed from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng in Suixian, Hubei (see Figure 3), is a clear example of the Chu Dance integrating "witchic culture," the ritual music culture of the Zhou dynasty, and the Chu local "water culture" and "phoenix culture": In the "Drumming Dance Diagram," although the dancers hold the Zhou dynasty ritual drums, their knee-bending and whirling dance postures seem to subtly echo the vortex patterns formed when water encounters an obstruction; in the "Bell Striking and Stone Clapper Diagram," the bell striker's "bird head" is undoubtedly related to the "wind-veneration culture" of the Chu region.

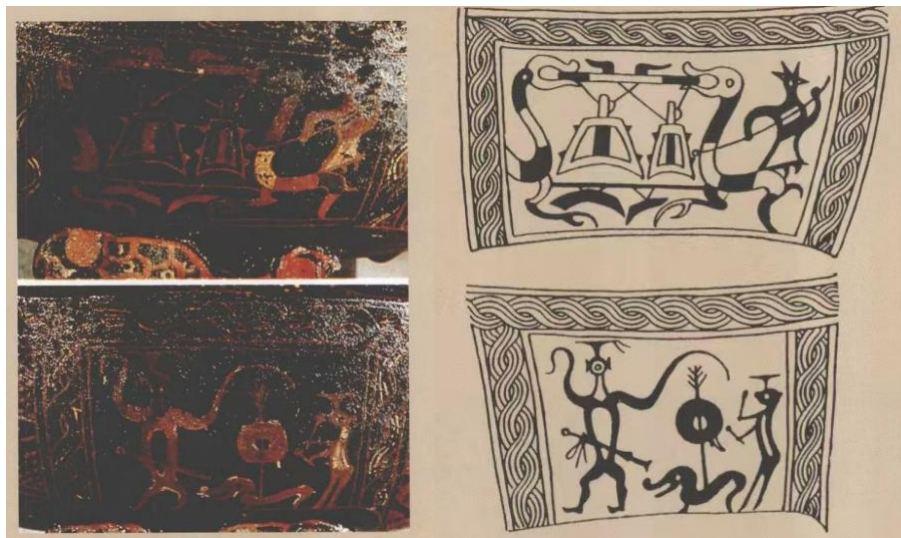


Figure 3: On the "Bell and Chime Striking Scene" (top) and "Drumming and Dancing Scene" (bottom) of the mandarin duck-shaped music and dance lacquer box unearthed from Suixian, Hubei.

2.1.5 Taoist Philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi Promotes Inclusiveness

Chu culture and Taoist culture are both important parts of Chinese traditional culture. Chu culture is a regional culture, while Taoist culture is a school - based one. They are independent yet complementary. Chu culture nurtured Taoist culture, influencing its core ideas, attitude to life, and literary style. In turn, Taoist culture greatly influenced Chu culture. Laozi's "Tao Te Ching" highlights the importance of natural tolerance and the philosophy of balancing opposites like long and short, being and nothingness, big and small. Under the influence of Laozi and Zhuangzi's philosophy, Chu Dance developed an inclusive nature, absorbing external cultures while maintaining its unique "Dao - formless" character. This allowed it to retain witchistic elements and incorporate Central Plains' cultural traditions, creating its artistic distinctiveness.

In essence, the uniqueness of Chu Dance, shaped by diverse cultural influences, stems from "the identity consciousness that the Chu people realized during the interaction between their 'barbarization' and 'Sinicization', as well as the natural philosophy and dialectics of the Chu region's Lao-Zhuang philosophy" (Zhang, 2021).

2.2 The Aesthetic Characteristics of Chu Dance

In the exchange and collision of various music and dance cultures, Chu Dance has been open - minded and inclusive, absorbing the strengths of all and integrating them into its own style. As a result, it has developed three major aesthetic characteristics: the unity of lightness and heaviness, the unity of complexity and simplicity, and a dance form with "long sleeves, slender waist, and twisting body".

2.2.1 The Unity of Lightness and Heaviness

Chu Dance combines the heavy, clumsy style of primitive dances with light, graceful movements.

The heavy and clumsy style, marked by thickness and simplicity, is a key trait of primitive dances that were full of life's tension and done in simple faith to praise and pray for good things. This style continued through the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. Chu Dance, due to the influence of Xia-Shang witch dances and the remaining Southern clan structures, kept more ancient traditions. So, Southern Chu Dance took in the light style but still kept its original heavy style. For example,

the ancient Chu Dances "Jie Feng" and "Ji Chu" were both "high-spirited, intense, and even tragic"(Wang,2014).

The lightness in Chu Dance is a reaction against gravity, contrasting with the heaviness of its downward - focused, spirit - gathering style. It's influenced by the new, soft and decadent dance style of Zheng and Wei, and also reflects the Daoist dialectical challenge to "primitive dance style". The pursuit of this new style creates an ascending, ethereal dance quality, nurtured by Daoist ideas of freedom, naturalness, and yin - valuing softness. It's expressed through flexible waist and arm movements, and aided by light - textured costumes with "long sleeves" and "slim waist" designs, giving Chu Dance a romantic, free - spirited style. For instance, in the "Shi Yi Ji" (Memorial Records of the Historian) by Wang Jia of the Jin Dynasty, it is documented that in the kingdom of Guanyan, the "Xuan Tian Two Maidens," Xuanjuan and Timo, performed dances that resembled light smoke swirling with the "Yingchen"; that moved like feathers swaying with the wind with the "Jiyu"; and had a demeanor as soft as silk floss, seemingly able to be gathered into the sleeves with the "Xuanhuai" (Wang,2014).

A witchistic music-dance painting on a brocade from a Chu tomb in Xinyang, Henan, depicts three witches in the same scene with different body languages.: the small witch on the right and the big witch in the middle have light - textured sleeves, while the big witch's bent arms and the small witch on the left show heaviness. The contrast between the two small witches and the big witch's "two qualities in one body" indicate that in Chu Dance, lightness and heaviness can coexist and blend, even within the same body, creating a unique aesthetic experience.

For example, the music and dance diagram of witchcraft festival unearthed on the painted silk tomb of Chu in Xinyang, Henan Province (Figure 4) describes the unique music and dance activities of witchcraft festival. In the picture, the three wizards are in the same music and dance scene, but they have different body languages: the sleeves of the right wizard and the middle wizard show a light texture, while the arms of the big wizard and the left wizard show a sense of heavy and clumsy. The contrast of the body texture of the two small wizards and the "one and two qualities" of the big wizards show that in Chu Dance, the light and heavy can not only coexist harmoniously in the same music and dance scene, but also blend in the same dance body, which can be said to be opposite to each other, bringing the viewer a unique aesthetic feeling.



Figure 4: The witchic ritual music and dance scene on the painted silk zither unearthed from the Chu tomb in Xinyang, Henan

The aesthetic characteristics of the dance movements of "the unity of grace and weightiness"

in Chu Dance have had a profound impact on the style of Han dynasty dance. For instance, many of the Han dynasty pictorial bricks depict the Pan Gu dance, where the long sleeves intertwine and cross, the silk skirts rise and flutter, and the dance postures of turning back to look or bending sideways show a light and soft character; whereas the vigorous jumping and stomping on the drum, the rapid and intense twisting of the waist, and the bending of the waist demonstrate a heavy and robust momentum and a vigorous tension. It can be said that Han dynasty dance gracefully reveals weightiness and softly shows robustness, effectively inheriting and promoting the traditions of Chu Dance.

2.2.2 The Unity of the Ornate and the Simple

Chu Dance combines ornate and simple elements. Its ornate side is shown in diverse content, a preference for grandeur, and advanced skills like complex sleeve movements. It also features luxurious costumes, diverse hairstyles, elaborate accessories, and beautiful props. The dance's pursuit of splendor, stemming from in-depth exploration of materials and techniques, sometimes led to vulgar displays of wealth and skill. However, this ornateness isn't purely vulgar; it reflects Chu Dance's entertaining nature and the aesthetic experience brought by its secularization.



Figure 5: "Xiao Xu checks the dance diagram" on the painted lacquer box unearthed from a Chu tomb in Changsha, Hunan

But while tending towards ornateness, Chu Dance still retained the simple and elegant style of the Zhou court's ritual music and dance to some extent. For instance, the Chu Dancers depicted in the "Xiao Xu tour dance diagram" (Figure 5) on a painted lacquer box from a Chu tomb in Changsha, Hunan, wore double - layered robes with white long sleeves inside and black ones outside, reaching the ground. They also wore unified black hats, with their bodies slightly bent backward or sideways in a "half - moon" shape, gaze aligned with their sleeves towards the front - lower direction, and movements slow and graceful, exuding a simple and elegant aesthetic.

2.2.3 The dance - posture form of "long sleeves, slender waist, and twisting body"

"Long sleeves, slender waist" and "twisting body" are typical Chu Dance postures. Most Chu Dance relics show dancers with long sleeves and a slender waist. Long sleeves extend the dancers' arms, waving gracefully in the air like smoke or rainbows, creating a sense of elegance and dynamism. As "Han Fei Zi" states, "Long sleeves are good for dancing," showing this attire was a Warring States Period fashion.

Dance is a fluid art where the waist, central to body movement, significantly impacts the dance's artistic effect. The saying "Chu Lingwang preferred slender waists, causing many in the country to starve" ("Mozi") reflects a cultural admiration for slimness. Thus, Chu Dancers prized a slender waist, which not only enhances elegance and grace but also boosts expressiveness, creating an ethereal style. This emphasis on the waist gives Chu Dance its distinctive "twisting and bending" form.

The "Records of the Grand Historian: The Marquis of Liu's House" records: "Dance the Chu Dance for me, and I will sing the Chu song for you." The "long sleeves and slender waist"

aesthetic of Chu Dance laid the foundation for the typical "raised sleeves and bent waist" pose in Han - era Chinese traditional dance. This aesthetic is still evident in many classical dance works today.

At the historical crossroads, ancient Chu Dance, under the Chu people's self - identity and guided by the natural view and dialectics of Taoism in Chu, integrated the elegant Zhou court music, wild witch dances, and the new music-dance fusion of Zheng and Wei. It evolved into a style blending lightness with heaviness, ornateness with simplicity, and characterized by "long sleeves, slender waist, and twisting body". This laid the trend for Han - era dance, highlighted Chu culture's openness and innovation, matched the era's development and ethnic aesthetic preferences, and left a significant mark on China's dance history.

3.Contemporary Chu Dance

Professor Zhou Zhiqiang from Nankai University, at the "BDA Dance Forum (2024) - Chinese Classical Dance Sub - forum", said that "classical dance is a form of Anthony Giddens' 'post - traditional society'. It's 'post - traditional' art, not 'neo - traditional' or 'traditional' art. " Only by recognizing Chinese classical dance as "post - traditional" can we avoid the "inheritance trap" of "traditional art". The same goes for the contemporary revival of Chu Dance. It's not just copying history or re - presenting past dances, but respecting history, infusing contemporary thinking and aesthetics, innovating in inheritance, and developing in innovation.

The historical formation of Chu Dance benefited from multicultural integration, and today, its revival in the contemporary multicultural context faces equally significant challenges. Compared to ancient Chu Dance, the current revival operates within an even more intricate multicultural environment. Dance artists of successive generations have explored diverse practical pathways to revive Chu Dance, yet numerous obstacles persist. Within the contemporary multicultural framework, how to preserve the unique charm of Chu Dance while innovating and developing it in step with the times—ensuring this cultural treasure reinvigorates with new vitality in the modern era—remains a critical issue that contemporary practitioners of Chu Dance must deliberate deeply.

3.1 The Multicultural Context of Contemporary Chu Dance Creations

3.1.1 Cultural Exchange in the Globalization Context

The globalization wave is sweeping the world, with China becoming an integral part of it. International exchanges are increasingly close, and the scope of cultural dissemination is expanding. However, cultures are also undergoing exchange, collision, integration, and reconstruction, leading to a series of "side effects." On the one hand, globalization introduces a "hybrid" nature into cultural collisions, resulting in a "homogenization" crisis caused by the "disappearance of the other." On the other hand, the export of culture may lead to the simplification of Eastern culture into exotic symbols from a Western perspective, causing cultural consumerism to erode the locality of regional cultures.

The revival of Chu Dance faces the opportunities and challenges of "cultural exchange in the globalization context." It needs to balance "self-construction" and "other's gaze" in a cross-cultural context. We must be vigilant about the threats of "homogenization" and "symbolism" that Chu Dance may encounter in the globalization context, maintain self-reflection and openness, and employ a "glocalization" strategy. By skillfully using "accessible media," the revival of Chu Dance can both preserve its intrinsic cultural genes and meet the "aesthetic expectations" of a global audience.

3.1.2 The Contemporary Evolution of Aesthetic Orientations

Today, with the advancement of the era, audiences' aesthetic preferences are undergoing rapid and unprecedented changes. Concurrently, the enhancement of Chinese citizens' "cultural confidence," coupled with the laws and regulations on "intangible cultural heritage protection" introduced by the Party and the state, as well as guiding principles and policies such as "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" and "cultural confidence," has sparked a revival wave of traditional Chinese culture in society. Chu dance, an outstanding creation of ancient Chinese dance, though irrecoverable after experiencing a "rupture" in its historical transmission, remains a significant cultural legacy. Chu Dance is an outstanding creation of ancient Chinese dance, which has become untraceable after experiencing historical "discontinuity. However, driven by the public's enthusiasm for traditional culture, Chu Dance can be seen as "a product of inventing tradition" in the words of Eric Hobsbawm. Therefore, the revival of Chu Dance should not blindly pursue historical restoration but should be a "re - construction" based on current aesthetics and needs. Yet, this reconstruction must be grounded in a deep understanding of cultural relics, historical documents, and the folk dances of Chu - culture regions, which are like "living fossils". It should not lose its cultural depth or even contradict history just to meet modern demands.

3.1.3 The Use of Modern Technological Means

Nowadays, science and technology are developing rapidly, with various modern technological media and methods such as the internet, new media, integrated media, AI, etc., emerging in an endless stream and iterating quickly. However, technology is also a "double-edged sword." On the one hand, modern science and technology can be used as tools to promote the reproduction and dissemination of Chu Dance. For example, modern analytical methods can be used to analyze the "action genes" of Chu Dance imagery from cultural relics and documents, while a three-dimensional motion capture system can deeply analyze the mechanical formation trajectory of typical Chu Dance postures, presenting them with the aid of AI; VR and other means can also be used to reproduce the "witchic" scenes and atmosphere of Chu Dance, allowing the audience to feel as if they are there, and using the internet to expand the dissemination range of Chu Dance. On the other hand, the introduction of modern science and technology can also lead to the disappearance of bodily experience and the hegemony of algorithmic technology. Although digital reproduction methods can enhance the efficiency of Chu Dance creation and expand its dissemination range, they may strip the "aura" of the dance, causing the dissolution of the integrity and ritualization of Chu Dance, its "presence," and even leading to a "technological spectacle" lacking breath and improvisational creation.

In summary, the reproduction of Chu Dance in the context of multiculturalism can only transform from fragmented "museum specimens" into "living cultural genes" under contemporary reconstruction by maintaining self-reflection and openness amidst the tensions of diversity.

3.2 Contemporary Approaches to Chu Dance Creation

Chu Dance, an important Chinese art form, has seen diverse contemporary revival efforts. Many small - scale works like "Chu Waist" (Beijing Dance Academy,1997), "Ji Chu" (Hubei Vocational College of Art,2012), and "Mountain Ghost" (Beijing Dance Academy,2023), and large - scale stage works such as "Chu Bell Chimes and Dance" (Hubei Provincial Song and Dance Theatre, 1983), "Nine Songs" (Cloud Gate Dance Theatre,1984), "Chu Rhythms" (Wuhan Song and Dance Theatre,1994), and "Music and Long Song" (Hubei Provincial Performing Arts

Group,2024) have been created. All these works are based on Chu Dance culture, respect historical facts, and infuse modern innovation and aesthetic appeal.To explore the revival paths of Chu Dance, the author chooses three works, "Chu Waist", "Nine Songs", and "Ji Chu", as examples for in - depth analysis.

3.2.1 Sun Ying's "Chu Waist": A Museum - style Aesthetic Presentation Based on

Archaeological Evidence



Figure 6: Dance "Chu Waist" (Premiere: Beijing Dance Academy, 1997)

Since China's reform and opening-up, as the nation rapidly integrated with international communities and expanded its global horizons, the Chinese people began to "trace cultural roots" and revalue their traditional heritage while absorbing foreign influences and advancing with the times. From the late 1970s through the end of the 20th century, multiple waves of reviving "ancient Chinese music and dance" emerged in the field of contemporary classical dance stage creation. Against this cultural backdrop, Chu Waist was born.

As a representative work of Sun Ying's "Han-Tang School" of classical dance, Chu Waist adheres to the school's tradition of prioritizing historical authenticity and aesthetic embodiment. During its creation, Sun Ying reconstructed historical contexts and revitalized archival materials, using Han Dynasty brick and stone reliefs, unearthed Chu artifacts, and textual evidence such as The Nine Songs to piece together fragments of the past and restore historical "antiquity." As Sun Ying asserted, "Establishing a contemporary classical dance system does not hinge on collecting most movements, postures, or techniques. The prerequisite lies in formulating a coherent aesthetic philosophy."

In creating Chu Waist , Sun Ying masterfully captured the quintessential aesthetic features of Chu Dance: its shamanistic ethos, the harmonious unity of "lightness and weight," "ornate complexity and refined simplicity," and the iconic "long sleeves, slender waists, and sinuous body curves." The choreography is structured in three sections—slow, fast, slow—mirroring classical musical phrasing. The costume design, featuring layered robes with broad sleeves and exposed midriffs, accentuates the dancers' slender waists, a hallmark of Chu Dance aesthetics. The "lingzi" (plumed headdresses) adorning the performers' heads evoke the "phoenix totem worship," symbolizing the shamanic role of "feathered intermediaries" bridging the human and divine

realms. Movement-wise, the work centers on the emblematic "arched sleeves and bent waist" motif, where expansive, oppositional tensions in the choreography—imbued with fierce dynamism—contrast with the inherent grace of female dancers, conjuring a complex aura of solemnity, ecstasy, and mysticism. Through *Chu Waist*, Sun Ying not only resurrected the distinctive dance traditions of Chu but also invited modern audiences to re-examine and reimagine traditional culture through a contemporary lens, grounded in rigorous cultural scholarship.

3.2.2 Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's "Nine Songs": A Pan - Eastern Translation of Decentralized Reconstruction in a Cross - Cultural Context



Figure 7: The dance drama "Nine Songs" (premiere: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, 1984)

Though a Chinese contemporary dance troupe, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre has always followed the principle of "Chinese composing, Chinese choreographing, and Chinese performing for Chinese audiences." Rooted in "traditional culture," its works integrate avant - garde concepts, focusing on pure body language derived from breathing, and vividly presenting Chinese humanistic care. Over 50 years, its artistic perspective and practice have expanded from Taiwan to mainland China, and then to the world.

In "Nine Songs", Lin Huaimin deconstructs "Chu culture" and "witchistic rites" from a modernist perspective.

Using images like lotus ponds and oil lamps to recreate "ritual feelings," and through cross - media means, he transforms Chu cultural symbols into a "pan - Eastern" presentation of universal human emotions, avoiding geographical limitations. The music blends Tibetan chanting and Japanese gagaku, creating a new cross - cultural "witchistic" context. Centered on ancestor worship, the piece uses interspersed time - space and East - West fusion to reflect on humanity in modern society.

Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's *Nine Songs* skillfully employs "culturally permeable mediums" to navigate the interplay between Chinese and global cultures, forging its distinctive cultural identity. Through this work, the world encounters a Chinese corporeal aesthetic rooted in ancient traditions yet imbued with a uniquely exotic allure—a testament to the enduring vitality of China's dance heritage in transcending temporal and spatial boundaries.

3.2.3 Hubei Vocational College of Art's "Ji Chu": Presentation of witchistic Sacrificial Rituals in

a Specific Time and Space under a Local Identity



Figure 8: Dance "Ji Chu" (Premiered by Hubei Art Vocational College, 2012)

Hubei, a key birthplace and center of Chu culture, bears rich Jingchu heritage and has developed a profound "Jingchu culture." The region fully embodies and inherits the romanticism, witchistic culture, artistic achievements, and literary traditions of Chu culture. Today, through heritage protection, cultural - tourism integration, and artistic innovation, Jingchu culture has been revitalized, becoming a vital symbol of Hubei's local culture.

Since 1983, with works like "Chu Bell Chimes and Dance", "Chu Soul", "Chu Rhyme", "Bell Sounds of Chu Sky", "Ode to the Tangerine" and "Music and Long Song", generations of dancers from Hubei Provincial Song and Dance Theatre, Wuhan Song and Dance Theatre, and Hubei Vocational College of Art have continuously explored the province's cultural heritage, creating works that blend regional culture, Chu culture, and modern aesthetics.

Since the 20th century, Chinese classical dance has become more and more uniform on stage. In 2012, Hubei Vocational College of Art created and performed the dance "Ji Chu". Drawing on Hubei's regional identity as the "Land of Jingchu," the work explores "Chu dance," a form with a rich history and distinct style. By magnifying folk moves like foot-stamping and arm-swinging from local dances such as Jingzhou Huagu and Tujia's Hand-waving Dance, it creates an intense movement quality. Through fierce masks, quick neck movements, and quivering "feathers," it presents a mysterious and ancient style, immersing the audience in Chu's shamantic rituals and transforming historical memory into a symbol of regional cultural identity.

Looking at today's stage works inspired by "Chu culture" and "Chu Dance", "witchistic sacrifice culture" and "feathered headdresses" are almost universally used as "Chu cultural symbols". These serve as a means to create a sense of "defamiliarization" in the dance performance, set in a specific time and space. The mysterious and eerie atmosphere of "witchistic sacrifice culture" contrasts sharply with everyday life, highlighting its exotic nature and arousing the audience's curiosity and desire to explore. The long "feathers" on the head, symbolizing the "bird totem worship" in Chu culture and the figure of the "great witch", extend the dancer's physical space, symbolizing communication between heaven and earth, and reflecting classical

cultural traits. As stated by Duan Fei, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Art and a national first-class performer, "The costumes and props in Chinese classical dance are cultural carriers, extensions of the body and mind, conveying specific identities of a particular period"(Duan,2022).

An analysis of today's Chu - dance works reveals that whether it's Sun Ying's pursuit of Chu Dance's "purity", Lin Hwai - min's emphasis on common cultural values and universal spirit by incorporating Chu - cultural symbols into a global context, or local Hubei troupes' presentation of their regional identity, all these efforts exemplify dance practitioners' exploration of Chu culture's uniqueness for its "creative transformation" and "innovative development". They form a diverse "Chu - dance spectrum" today, offering valuable insights for classical dance reconstruction and the modern transformation of traditional arts.

3.3Contemporary Practical Reflection

3.3.1 Difficulties in Reviving Chu Dance with Limited Historical Materials

"Revived works should be research - oriented, based on a deep respect and thorough study of historical remains, presenting an objective form not swayed by modern aesthetic needs or utilitarian goals" (Zhang,2016). Ancient Chu Dance, originating in the Three Kingdoms period and flourishing during the Han Dynasty, hasn't been passed down due to its long history and the oral and physical transmission characteristics of dance art. It only seems to survive in the folk dances of Chu-culture regions. The scarcity and complexity of interpreting relevant relics and documents make the revival of Chu Dance very difficult, perhaps even more so than that of "Tang Dynasty music and dance" as envisioned by Mr. Liu Fengxue (1925-2023). Therefore, when reviving Chu Dance, it's crucial to stress that being limited to form and appearance may easily restrict us by the scarce historical materials. Instead, adopting a reverse - thinking approach, like Sun Ying, and starting from the overall spirit of the period to search for possible forms and movements might yield surprising results.

3.3.2 Balancing Tradition and Innovation in Chu Dance

The creation of all historical and cultural works of art inevitably faces the issue of balancing tradition and innovation. The proper approach is to "respect the ancient without reverting to it, and to observe the old without being bound by it."

The breakthrough in the contemporary creation of Chu dance lies in grasping its unique spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic essence. Based on this understanding, modern interpretation should be built on a reverence for, and a selective use of, Chu dance's historical forms and culture, thereby endowing Chu dance with a contemporary spirit.

3.3.3 Imperfect Talent Training and Education Mechanism for Chu Dance

Currently, the talent training and education mechanism for Chu Dance is not perfect, with three main issues: first, domestic dance schools have weak teaching and research in Chu Dance, lacking systematic courses and tutorials; second, there is a shortage of professional teachers who excel in both Chu Dance theory and practice, affecting the quality of teaching, creation, and research; third, Chu Dance is often seen as a "regional" or "marginal" subject in dance education, making it hard to secure sufficient resources. The establishment of the "Chu Dance Research Center" at Hubei Vocational College of Art in 2023 is a positive development for Chu Dance, potentially becoming a comprehensive base for research, teaching, performance, and communication.

4.Conclusion and Suggestion

“In the continuous bodily cultural memories from ancient times to the present, the dancing body has achieved the unification of artistic value, social value, religious value, and cultural value.”(Duan,2022) The Chu Dance, in particular, has evolved from its ancient roots into the contemporary Rejuvenation of Chu Dance, now situated within a vastly different multicultural context. Yet, what persists unchanged is the indomitable spirit of the Chinese people: vibrant, courageous in artistic innovation, and ever advancing with the times. During the Three Kingdoms period, when Chu Dance was at the historical "crossroads" of "Xia-Shang Wu dance, Zhou dynasty elegant music, Zheng-Wei music," it chose to face the many historical cultures with an inclusive attitude, absorbing and integrating them to form its own unique style. It even profoundly influenced the mainstream culture of later generations' music and dance, but ultimately disappeared in the vast river of history. In contemporary times, creators seek historical traces from the remaining cultural relics, documents, and the "living" remnants of Chu Dance, attempting to recreate the elegance of the past with a contemporary aesthetic that better adapts to the trends of the times. However, under the influence of the complex multicultural background of today, the creation and presentation of Chu Dance is undoubtedly a long and arduous task, and we can only encourage ourselves with Qu Yuan's spirit of "seeking and exploring".....

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