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Research on the Artistic Characteristics of Chinese Ballet in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving artistic characteristics of Chinese ballet in the 21st century through a multidimensional lens. It explores the integration of traditional Chinese culture with global artistic trends and highlights the innovative transformations in performance and choreography. Specifically, the research focuses on two core objectives: (1) to investigate how Chinese ballet has embraced cultural integration and creative expression within the context of globalization, and (2) to analyze the emerging trends shaped by modern science and technology, as well as the development of individualized artistic styles. Employing a combination of literature review, observational analysis, and qualitative interviews, this study systematically identifies the characteristics of stage presentation, narrative techniques, and artistic expression in contemporary Chinese ballet theatre. The findings indicate that Chinese ballet has cultivated a distinctive artistic identity by blending Eastern and Western elements, achieving notable innovation in both form and content. This progression not only reinforces the cultural identity of Chinese ballet but also enhances its visibility and impact on the global stage, offering valuable theoretical insights for its continued development and international recognition.

Introduction

The 21st century marks a significant turning point in the development of Chinese ballet theatre, symbolizing both a continuation of past achievements and a gateway to new artistic possibilities. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Chinese ballet theatre underwent a complex trajectory of growth, decline, and revitalization. This process laid a firm foundation for the genre, particularly during the two decades following China's reform and opening-up policy, when significant efforts were made to cultivate creative talent and institutionalize a national school of ballet (Zhang, 2010; Liu, 2013). By the end of the 20th century, Chinese ballet theatre had established core structures for talent development and choreography, achieving substantial progress in tandem with the country's broader social and cultural evolution (Chen, 2012).

The early 21st century presents an important temporal and cultural juncture for reexamining the trajectory of Chinese ballet. On one hand, the beginning of a new century is a symbolically significant node in historical consciousness; on the other, it coincides with unprecedented socio-economic transformations in China, including urban modernization, growing cultural confidence, and improved quality of life (Wang, 2015; Sun, 2019). These changes have directly influenced the aesthetic dimensions and production conditions of ballet theatre, as new themes, techniques, visual languages, and musical expressions have emerged to reflect contemporary societal narratives (Huang, 2018).

In particular, the increasing national investment in cultural development and the strategic promotion of creative industries have supported the flourishing of Chinese ballet through improved infrastructure, institutional backing, and international exchange (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2020). New works continue to emerge, enriched by interdisciplinary collaboration and the fusion of Eastern and Western cultural elements. Chinese ballet theatre is not only preserving traditional motifs but also innovating in ways that foreground its cultural uniqueness. These developments demonstrate a clear evolution from merely adopting Western ballet models to constructing a distinctive "Chinese school" of ballet, characterized by deep-rooted national identity and artistic individuality (Ou, 2014).

Moreover, Chinese ballet has increasingly participated in global cultural exchange, achieving recognition on the international stage. Productions such as Raise the Red Lantern and The Red Detachment of Women have been performed in major cultural capitals around the world, receiving acclaim for their fusion of political narrative, visual spectacle, and cultural symbolism (Xiao, 2014; Wu, 2021). This global outreach illustrates not only the artistic maturity of Chinese ballet theatre but also reflects the broader rise of China's cultural soft power in the global arena.

Despite these notable achievements, academic research on Chinese ballet theatre remains uneven. Much of the existing scholarship is focused on historical retrospectives or case studies of iconic works, with limited attention paid to contemporary innovations and cross-cultural dynamics. There remains a need for comprehensive analysis that integrates multiple perspectives—historical, cultural, technical, and aesthetic—particularly in the context of globalization and digital transformation. This study seeks to address this gap by systematically examining the development trends, unique features, and future trajectories of Chinese ballet theatre in the 21st century.

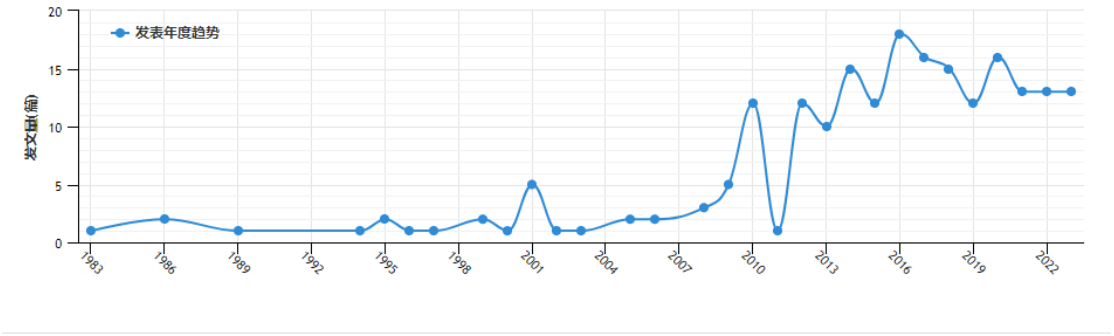
Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical study of Chinese ballet theatre covers not only the history of the study of Chinese dance theatre art, but also the history of Chinese ballet dance. In terms of the art of Chinese dance theatre, as early as 1990 there was the book A History of Chinese Dance Theatre which macroscopically sorted out the 40-year history of Chinese ballet theatre before the 1990s, the direction of development at the mid-macro level and with the art of ballet dance. ((Holland) Volkmar, 2011: 219) Years later, Yu Ping published his book A History of the Development of Contemporary Chinese Dance Theatre, in which several chapters were devoted to a very detailed discussion of Chinese ballet theatre. In the research results of many scholars, the development of Chinese ballet theatre art is divided into stages, and the results of dance theatre works created in different periods are used as a basis for observation and analysis. (Gao Bo, 2010:28) In this process, many books and master's and doctoral theses have been published, and most of these large-format, systematic and macroscopic theoretical research results have vertically sorted out the whole process of the development of Chinese ballet theatre art, and conducted in-depth, comprehensive and exhaustive analyses and discussions of Chinese ballet theatre's styles, characteristics of the times and cultural orientations. (Hu Rongrong, 2010:292) This not only makes the academic research results related to Chinese ballet theatre more in-depth, but also forms an interdisciplinary research perspective to observe the development of Chinese ballet art. This is obviously more comprehensive and can also make the research results more in-depth. (Wang Jianjiang, 2017:128).

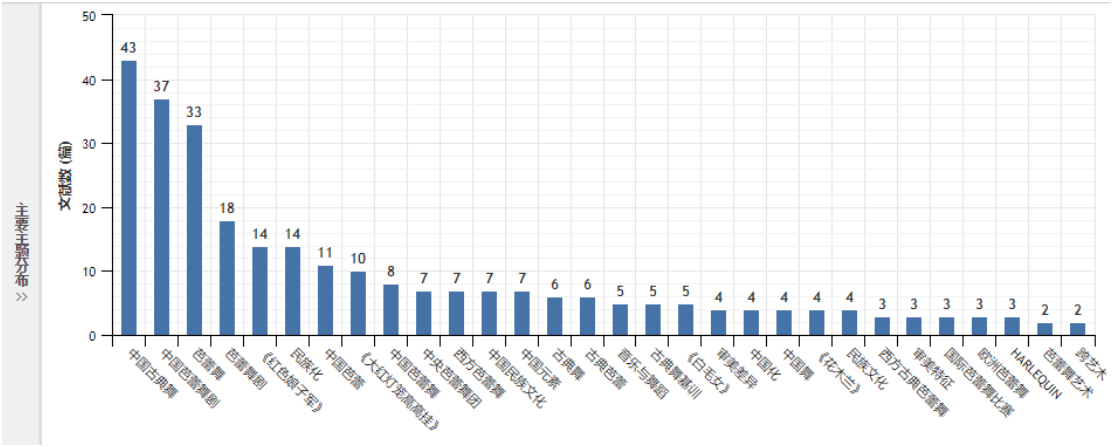
In the 21st century, a large number of original ballet theatre works such as "Mei Lanfang" with traditional Peking Opera cultural tone, how to integrate the content of ballet dance art, obviously the industry for the creators of the practice presents more praise and affirmation. (Zou Zhirui, 2012:64) In the past decade, a large number of revolutionary and historical works have appeared in the creation of Chinese ballet theatre art, which also shows the contemporary people's national sentiment, national spirit and the essence of traditional culture. At the same time, there are also such dance theatre works as "Shangri-La" and "Dunhuang", how to present the spirit of traditional Chinese culture, placing the issue of Chinese school and nationalisation in an important position in the theoretical review of the art of dance theatre, and thus focusing on how the art of Chinese ballet theatre can better present

the art that should be contained in the ballet itself in the contemporary socio-cultural environment and how to awaken the complex of Chinese national culture.

A search of Chinese ballet as a keyword for titles of related academic papers yielded a total of 154 papers. The time span is from 1 January 1980 to 26 April 2023. An illustration of the analysis of the content of the results is shown:



Source: China Knowledge (2023). Trend analysis of the number of academic papers issued by searching for "Chinese ballet" as keywords



Source: China Knowledge (2023). Distribution of main topics of relevant academic papers searched with "Chinese ballet" as keywords

As an extension of the current outreach related to the study of Chinese ballet theatre, the researcher also searched for relevant papers on the art of Chinese ballet dance. Because in the researcher's opinion, the art of dance theatre is rich and colourful, and in the process of dividing its internal structure, it has formed folk dance, classical dance and modern dance as the main body of the dance theatre works and so on. The art form of ballet theatre originates from the fusion of ballet dance and theatre art, and the creation of ballet dance itself covers the components of theatre content, so the study of ballet dance related literature can

understand how the body movements and artistic language of ballet dance can be used to express the content and emotions of the opera, and then transplanted into the art of dance theatre examples, which can form a more profound perception. It is worth noting that more than 40 dissertations, including 6 doctoral theses and 43 master's theses, are included in the 100 papers. Among them, there are master's theses from professional dance academies such as the Beijing Dance Academy, as well as master's and doctoral theses from universities such as the Nanjing Arts Institute and Shandong University. It can also be seen that the study of Chinese ballet dance art has always been the focus of attention in the academic world, especially in today's world, where the research direction is generally shifting to the areas of ballet Chineseisation, aesthetic differentiation, and updating of dance trends.

The conceptual framework

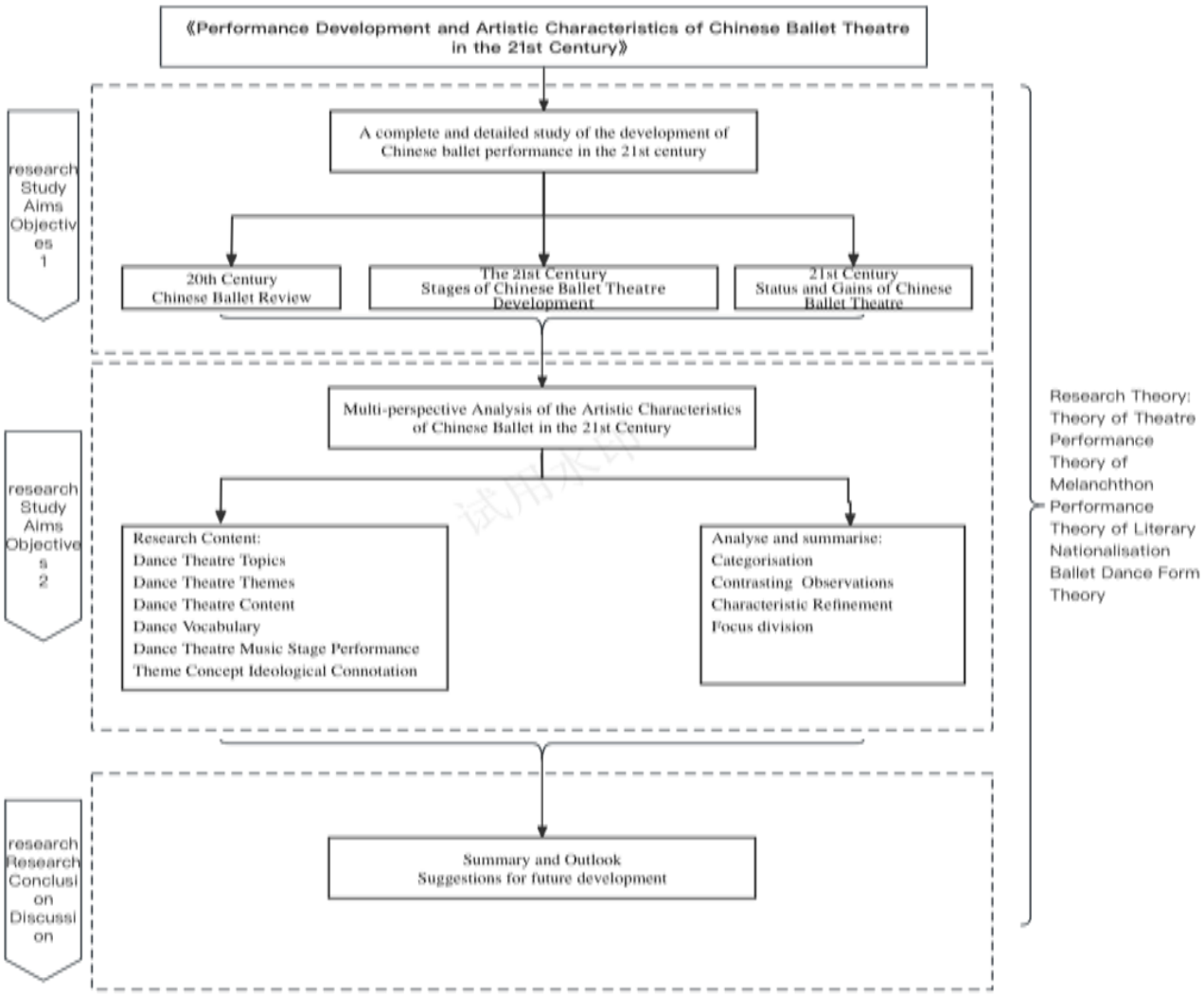


Figure 1 The conceptual framework

Objectives

1. Explore the cultural integration and innovative performance of Chinese ballet in the 21st century under the background of globalisation.

2. Summaries the innovative trends of Chinese ballet in the 21st century in terms of the application of modern technology and the expression of artistic personality.

Research Methodology

1. Observation method. According to a certain research purpose, research outline or observation table, a method of obtaining information by using one's own senses and aids to directly observe the object under study. For this study, in addition to borrowing the relevant theoretical results of the past theoretical community and the theoretical evaluation results of the case work, we should also watch the ballet theatre works on the spot based on our personal understanding and observation. From this, an objective, detailed and comprehensive perception is obtained.

2. Interview method. This study interviews the relevant creators, performers and work promoters and other relevant people. Listening to their observational perspectives and subjective views, we understand the actual situation of the current development of Chinese ballet theatre from an open and objective perspective.

Results

Research Objective 1: To explore the characteristics of cultural integration and innovation of Chinese ballet theatre in the 21st century.

Finding 1: The Deep Fusion of East and West in Ballet Theatre

1.1 Integration of traditional and modern artistic expression

In the 21st century, Chinese ballet has actively integrated Chinese and Western cultural traditions in its artistic expression, especially in costume design, music selection and performance style, incorporating elements of classical Chinese literature and visual arts. This integration creates a unique oriental aesthetics, making Chinese ballet more national in character, satisfying the cultural identity needs of the domestic audience while attracting the attention of the international audience.

1.2 Cultural richness and exchange of values

With the increase in international exchanges, Chinese ballet has gradually shifted from imitation of Western classics to exploration of cultural elements such as Chinese philosophy, history and religion. For example, in dance dramas based on classic Chinese literature such as Dream of the Red Chamber, the creators combine ballet techniques with Chinese aesthetics to enhance the cultural depth of the work, so that it not only conveys a sense of national pride, but also gives the work a high international artistic value.

Finding 2: Diversification of Narrative Techniques and Innovative Exploration

2.1 Transition from linear to non-linear narratives

In the 21st century, Chinese ballet is constantly innovating in narrative techniques, enriching the layers of the story through non-linear techniques such as memories, flashbacks, dreams, etc., so that the audience no longer relies solely on the dancers' movements when appreciating the story, but also experiences the multi-dimensional connotation of the story through multiple perspectives. This narrative technique greatly enhances the ideology and artistic depth of the dance drama.

2.2 Dramatic enhancement of multi-stranded narratives

With the help of stage sets and light and shadow technology, some ballet works show scenes that intertwine reality and fiction, enabling the audience to see the development of the plot in different spaces at the same time. In this way, the stage is no longer just a background, but becomes a participating part of the narrative story, deepening the dramatic effect of the narrative and enhancing the audience's immersion and understanding of the plot.

Finding 3: Innovative Use of Stage Technology to Enhance Artistic Performance

3.1 Application of multimedia and virtual technologies

Chinese ballet theatre has gradually introduced multimedia projection, 3D stereoscopic effects and virtual reality technology in the 21st century. These advanced technologies make the stage background change with the plot, forming a visual impact. For example, in works with historical themes, the grand historical scenes are displayed through multimedia technology, which makes the audience feel as if they are in the middle of the story and increases the infectious force of the work.

3.2 Theatrical effects of light and light and shadow

Stage lighting design also plays an important role in expressing the emotions of the characters and the ambience of the environment. Through the light and shadow changes, the dancers' performances are endowed with deeper emotional connotations, which makes the

audience not only enjoy the stage effects visually, but also feel the dancers' inner emotions, which greatly improves the artistic infectious force of the dance theatre.

Research Objective 2: To explore the use of personalized artistic expression in ballet.

Finding 1: Choreographer-Dancer Engagement

1.1 Incorporation of the dancer's individual style

In the 21st century Chinese ballet, dancers are no longer just executors of movement, but have become the subjects of emotional expression. Choreographers are paying more and more attention to the dancers' personalised expression, encouraging them to show the complexity of their roles through their unique styles. This collaborative approach has led to a richer dance theatre expression, demonstrating the fusion of individuality and art.

1.2 Openness of the choreographer in the creative process

The choreographer encourages the dancers to come up with their own ideas on movement choreography and emotional expression to create a more personalised artistic expression. This open mode of creation not only provides more creative space for the dancers, but also makes the dance theatre more diversified and unique in performance, showing the unique charm of the characters.

Finding 2: Depth and Complexity of Emotional Expression

2.1 Subtle presentation of emotions

In the 21st century, Chinese ballet theatre has become more in-depth in its expression of emotions, with dancers conveying the inner struggles and pains of their characters through details such as facial expressions, ease of movement, and strength, so that the audience will have a profound empathy when watching the dance. This delicate level of emotional expression makes the ballet more three-dimensional and full-bodied in its artistic expression.

2.2 Presentation of all aspects from body to mind

The dancers not only pursue precision and beauty in technique, but also pay more attention to the transmission of inner emotion. By devoting themselves to the role, they extend the emotion of the character from the body to the heart, so that the emotional expression of the dance theatre reaches a new height. This depth of emotion makes Chinese ballet performances on the international stage more artistically infectious and emotionally resonant for the audience.

Discussion

Current research on Chinese ballet theatre, both domestic and international, demonstrates a general consensus in affirming its arduous development and noteworthy accomplishments. Scholars recognize and appreciate the evolution of Chinese ballet theatre from diverse perspectives, often dividing its progress into distinct phases and comparing these stages against broader socio-cultural environments. Such comparative studies allow a horizontal perspective on how dance theatre art has been shaped by—and in turn, reflected—societal changes (Xiao, 2014).

A considerable body of literature also focuses on detailed case analyses of Chinese ballet theatre works. These studies often dissect the artistic elements and evaluate the creative quality of productions. The structure, thematic expression, choreography, music, and visual aesthetics are all scrutinized in order to assess how they contribute to the overall narrative and emotional resonance of the performance (Ou, 2014). This level of detailed engagement has contributed significantly to building an academic understanding of the internal mechanisms and creative logic that define Chinese ballet theatre.

Notably, many researchers in this field are themselves practitioners—either creators, performers, or collaborators within dance theatre projects. As such, they possess rich firsthand experience and insight. However, this dual identity can sometimes lead to theoretical shortcomings. Some studies reveal a tendency toward descriptive rather than analytical writing, often lacking a broader theoretical vision or macro-level perspective on the role and positioning of Chinese ballet theatre within the global performing arts landscape.

In contrast to existing literature that focuses largely on historical retrospectives or isolated case studies, this study introduces a more systematic and forward-looking analysis. It aims to explore the unique characteristics and evolving trends of Chinese ballet theatre in the new century. Key areas of innovation identified in this research include the integration of multiple cultural influences, the diversification of narrative structures, the adoption of modern stage technology, and the emphasis on individual artistic expression.

By examining these aspects through a multidimensional lens, this study not only fills the gap left by prior works but also provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the trajectory of Chinese ballet theatre in a globalized cultural context. The research contributes new theoretical insights that can guide future development and enhance the international influence of Chinese ballet theatre. This macroscopic and interdisciplinary

approach advances the field by moving beyond traditional limitations and fostering more dynamic interpretations of the art form in the 21st century.

Conclusion

To sum up, Chinese ballet since the 21st century has shown remarkable development characteristics in cultural integration, narrative innovation, the use of modern technology and personalized expression. These innovations have not only enriched the artistic expression of Chinese ballet, making it more ideological and visually impactful, but also enhanced its recognition and influence on the international stage. By digging deep into traditional Chinese cultural elements and combining them with modern art forms, Chinese ballet theatre has gradually stepped out of the country and become a unique window to display oriental aesthetics and national culture. In the future, the development of Chinese ballet theatre should continue to maintain this innovative path and achieve wider cultural dissemination and artistic exchange in the context of globalization.

Recommendations

1. Consolidated recommendations

In the context of globalization, Chinese ballet should further explore and highlight the essence of national culture in order to enhance its uniqueness and cultural infectivity. Specifically, it is suggested that creators should integrate more traditional artistic elements, such as Chinese classical literature, music and opera, into their dance dramas, and through the combination of East and West in stage sets, costume design and dance movements, create works that meet international aesthetics while reflecting the national style. In addition, the introduction of modern technology, such as multimedia projection, virtual reality, 3D lighting, etc., can greatly enhance the visual impact of stage performance and the richness of emotional expression. At the same time, the training of ballet choreographers and performers with an international outlook is also necessary to promote the global dissemination of Chinese ballet and to attract the attention and recognition of more international audiences. At the policy level, cultural departments and related organizations should continue to give policy and resource support to facilitate the creation and promotion of innovative and high-quality ballet works, so as to lay a solid foundation for the long-term development of Chinese ballet.

2. Suggestions for future research

Future research should focus on the adaptive and innovative development of Chinese ballet theatre in globalisation and multicultural exchanges, especially on how to enhance its international appeal while maintaining distinctive national characteristics. To this end, it is recommended that researchers adopt an interdisciplinary approach to more comprehensively analyse the developmental performance of Chinese ballet theatre in different socio-cultural environments. In addition, the research on the audience's cultural acceptance and emotional feedback of Chinese ballet theatre deserves attention. It is suggested that audience research, questionnaire surveys, big data analysis and other means be used to explore in depth the attitudes and aesthetic tendencies of audiences of different cultural backgrounds towards Chinese ballet theatre. At the same time, research on the changing needs and preferences of audiences of different generations will help to meet the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences more precisely in future works and provide guidance for the development of Chinese ballet theatre in the global art market. In addition, research into how Chinese ballet can be better integrated with other cultures and art forms will lay the foundation for its long-term dissemination and recognition on the international stage.

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