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Research on the Performance Development of Chinese Ballet Theatre in the 21st Century

Jingya Chen[1]*, Nataporn Rattanachaiwong[2], Qianqiu Jin[3]

ARTICLE INFO

Name of Author & Corresponding Author: *

1. Jingya Chen*
Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand.
Email: s62584947020@ssru.ac.th

2. Nataporn Rattanachaiwong
Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand.
Email: nataporn.ra@ssru.ac.th

3. Qianqiu Jin
Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand.
Email: jinqianqiu1391@sina.com

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to systematically research the development of Chinese ballet performance since the 21st century: 1. to compare the differences between the achievements of Chinese ballet choreography and performance since the 21st century and those of the previous century, and to analyze the development results; 2. to analyze the trend of changes in the quality of the artistic ontology, the language of creation, and the style of performance in Chinese ballet, and to reveal the diversified characteristics that have been formed since the 21st century. This paper uses a variety of methods such as literature research method, field survey method, case study method and so on. The results of the research show that Chinese ballet in the 21st century, on the basis of learning from Western classics, incorporates elements of Chinese local culture, and achieves breakthroughs in performance style and communication effects through innovative themes and technical means.

Introduction

Ballet originates from the western classical dance art in a very personalised form of dramatic dance, its dance art ontology has a very strict training system, for the presentation of artistic content in the dance movement also has a specific way of expression, with independent dance movements to convey the language of drama. Chinese ballet continues the Western ballet art form while incorporating Chinese national cultural elements. The characters and events represented are all from Chinese history and social phenomena, which makes Chinese ballet not only conform to the original appearance of Western ballet art, but also have oriental cultural colours at the same time. In this study, "performance development" has two main meanings. Firstly, from a dynamic point of view, "performance development" corresponds to the "21st century", comparing the achievements of Chinese ballet theatre choreography and performance in the 21st century with those of the last century, and then describing the current stage of development. Second level: From a static point of view, "performance development" covers a variety of variables and indicators. For example, the quality of the artistic body, the changes in the language of creation, and the tendency of the performance style, etc., are used to support the succession of Chinese ballet theatre art in the 21st century.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theoretical writings related to Chinese ballet theatre are the first literature to be collected in the course of this research, because theoretical books are obviously more prominent in terms of research perspectives and research methods, and have a comprehensive character. At the same time, a large number of theoretical texts can also provide a detailed explanation of each detailed issue. According to the current existing results of the relevant works searched, the main formation of the following aspects of the information system.

First, for the theoretical study of ballet theatre at the macro level, there are abundant original works and translations published in China at present. Introducing the wonderful artistic charm of ballet theatre and the various cultural imagery it is rich in. (Yu Ping, 2018:118) At the same time, in the theoretical research books about ballet theatre, there are also special research results on ballet theatre creation, performance, appreciation, education and other aspects. The macro research on ballet theatre mainly starts from the origin of western ballet theatre, then transitions to the main features of ballet theatre art in each country, and also covers the cultural history of Chinese ballet theatre as well as the fruitful achievements. (Qi Tianhang, 2014: 162) Some of the related theoretical research results are professional theoretical tool books focusing on industry insiders, while others are oriented to the general public, introducing the art of ballet theatre from a perspective of art appreciation and experience.

Secondly, the theoretical books about Chinese ballet theatre are also more diverse. These books are more inclined to the observation and research at the level of professional theoretical perspective, and many authors have witnessed the course of Chinese ballet theatre in the capacity of experiencer, participant and researcher. Therefore, in the process of theoretical structure, they always devote themselves to the objective and detailed description of the development of Chinese ballet theatre, and place more research emphasis on the analysis of the unique cultural, artistic and social attributes of Chinese ballet theatre. This is

obviously very conducive to the understanding of the development of Chinese ballet, and objectively formed a more systematic theoretical research results. (Lykov; Johnson, 2015:219) Parallel to the field of creation, together they constitute the comprehensive growth of the art of Chinese ballet theatre. In terms of the specific composition of the research, the research involves the interpretation of the historical works of the development of Chinese ballet theatre, the cultivation of artistic talents, the creation of dance theatre music, and the new characteristics of contemporary Chinese ballet theatre creation, new methods and new style, which all explain in detail the independent style of Chinese ballet theatre formed after absorbing the characteristics of the creation of Western ballet theatre, and very much agree with the process in which Chinese art workers' hard work in the creation and development of ballet theatre. (Xu Erchong, 2016:37) Although the theoretical books about Chinese ballet theatre are not rich, from a broader perspective, such as Chinese ballet and dance art, Chinese contemporary theatre art, and Chinese culture and art creation concepts, aesthetic characteristics and other aspects of the formation of special books are very rich and diverse, and objectively indirectly involved in the content of the Chinese ballet theatre art, forming an independent style between each other, and in this process, Chinese art workers have made great efforts for the creation and development of Chinese ballet theatre. Objectively, it also indirectly involves the relevant contents of Chinese ballet theatre, forming a close intertwining and fusion relationship with each other.

Thirdly, for the research results of academic papers related to the art of Chinese ballet theatre, the simpler and easier way is to collect and arrange them through online databases. The papers collected by China Knowledge Network (CNN) are relatively high in terms of coverage area and content quality, and their contents cover academic papers of more than 40 years since 1986. There are many important journals in the fields of literature and art research and theatre research in China in various periods, and a large number of master's and doctoral degree theses are included. Searching the titles of relevant academic papers with Chinese ballet theatre as the keyword yields a total of 83 papers, spanning from 1 January 1980 to 26 April 2023. The following is an example of the analysed graphs of the content of the results:

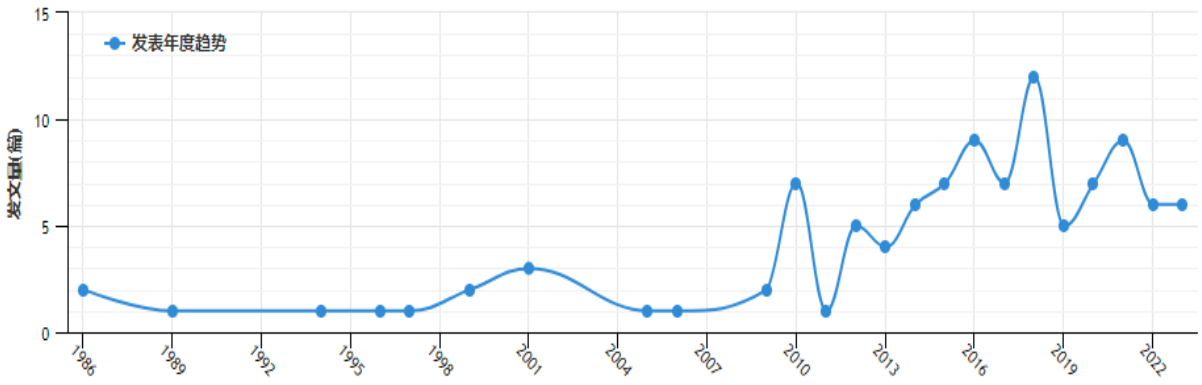

Figure 1 China Knowledge Network 40 years since 1986

Analysis of the overall trend of the number of academic papers issued with the keyword "Chinese ballet theatre" as the search word

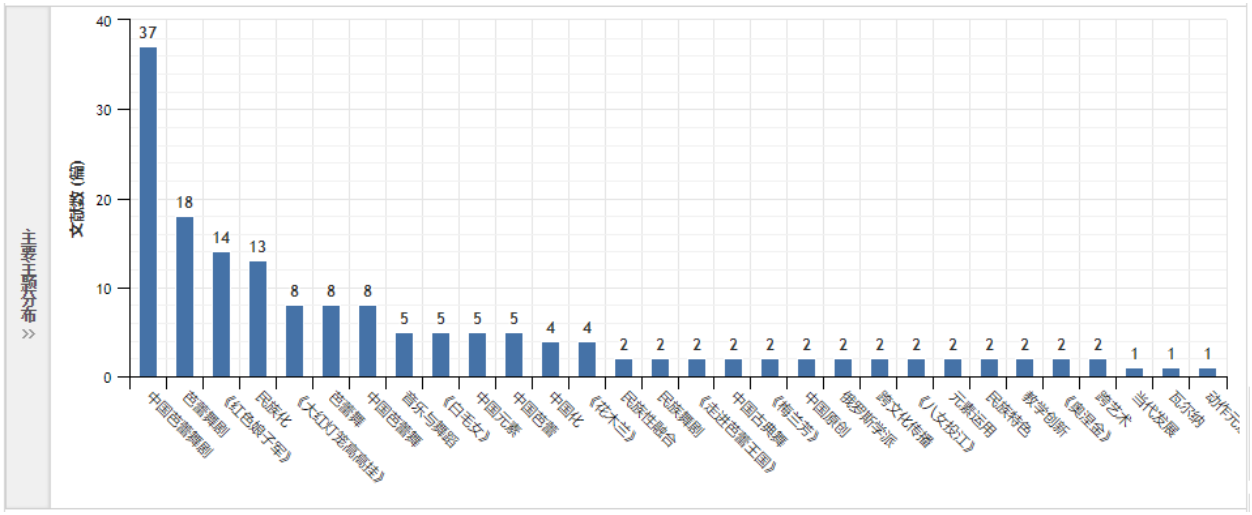

Figure 2 Distribution of main topics of academic papers searched with "Chinese ballet theatre" as keywords

Through the above list and the content of the relevant literature reflected in the collection of specific resources, the academic results on the naming and research of Chinese ballet theatre have only begun to appear since the beginning of the 21st century, and previous research in the relevant field was more often carried out under the title of "national ballet theatre", but obviously in the overall number is also relatively scarce. The overall number is also relatively scarce. (Wu Zhen, 2018:34) Existing research results focus more on the study of individual works, and are not sufficient for the development of Chinese ballet theatre as a whole since the 21st century, or for the study of works or the entire industry ecology in the macro dimension. At the same time, the quality of the relevant academic results varies, with analyses by well-known scholars in the industry, as well as academic papers by some college or higher education teachers.

The conceptual framework

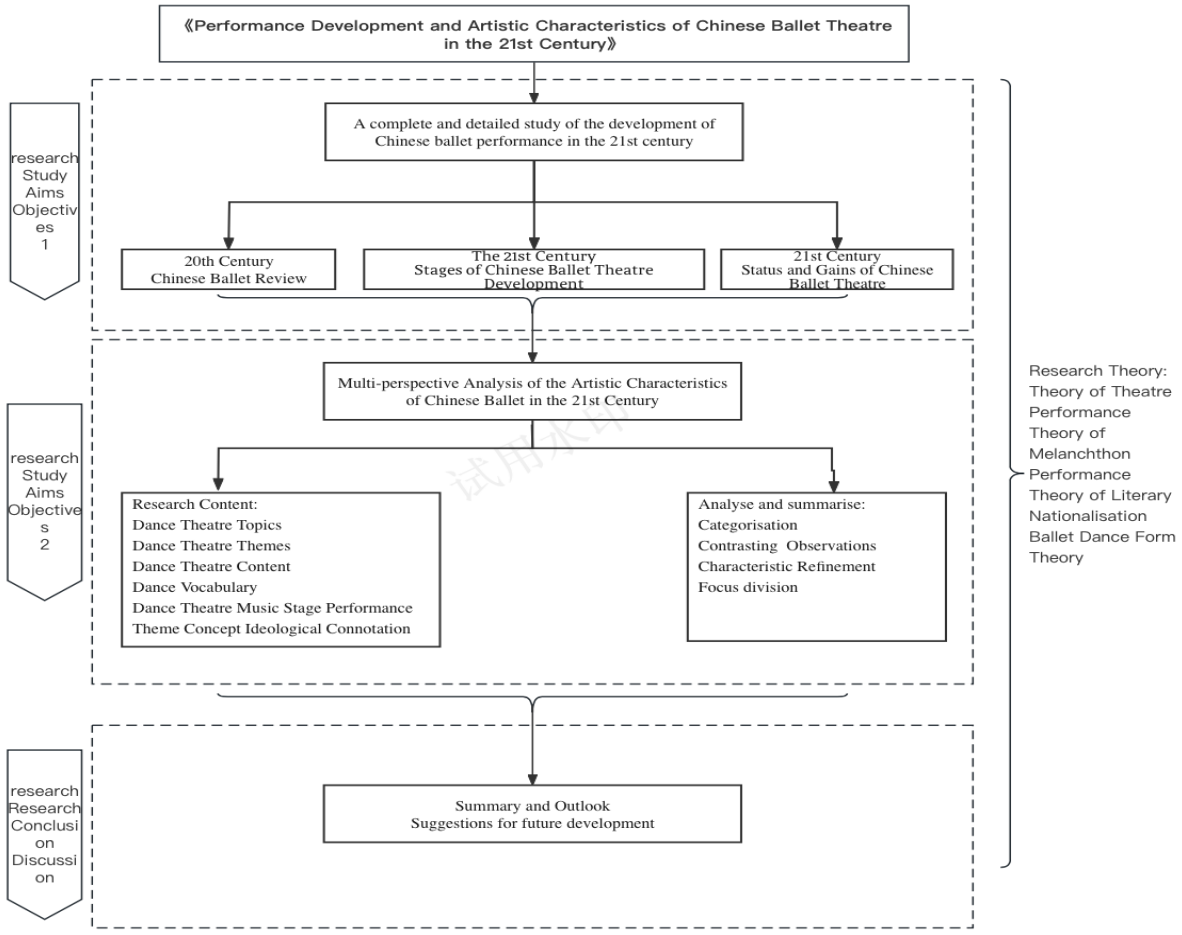

Figure 3 The conceptual framework

Objective

1. Compare the differences between the results achieved by Chinese ballet choreography and performance since the 21st century and those of the previous century, and analyse their development in terms of speed, intensity and quality;
2. To analyse the trends of Chinese ballet in terms of artistic ontological quality, creative language, performance style, social concern, etc., and to reveal the diversified characteristics formed in the new century.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a comprehensive and structured conceptual framework to investigate the performance development and artistic characteristics of Chinese ballet theatre in the 21st century. The framework is divided into three main research components: aims, objectives, and conclusions.

1. Research Aims

The overarching aim is to conduct a complete and detailed study of the development of Chinese ballet performance in the 21st century. This involves a chronological review and comparative analysis through three key stages:

1) A 20th-century review of Chinese ballet to establish historical context,
2) An exploration of the stages of Chinese ballet theatre development in the 21st century, and
3) An evaluation of the status and context of 21st-century Chinese ballet theatre.

2. The study conducts a multi-perspective analysis

The study conducts a multi-perspective analysis of the artistic characteristics of Chinese ballet, focusing on:

Research Content:

1) Dance theatre topics and themes,
2) Theatre content and vocabulary,
3) Theatre music and stage performance,
4) Thematic and ideological connotations of dance concepts.

Analysis and Summary Techniques:

1) Categorisation,
2) Contrasting observations,
3) Refinement of characteristics,
4) Division of artistic focus.

These aspects are analyzed using theoretical lenses that include:

1) Theory of Theatre Performance,
2) Theory of Melanchthon Performance,
3) Theory of Literary Nationalisation, and
4) Ballet Dance Form Theory.

3. Literature research method

The application of the literature research method in this study involves relevant books, journal articles, master and doctoral dissertations on the art of Chinese ballet theatre. Through the collection of data in different categories, focusing on individual works, relevant dates, and commentaries, we were able to produce more detailed and multi-perspective literature information.

4. Fieldwork method

This study intends to visit the relevant national ballet art groups to obtain the specific rehearsal process data and market resource data of the relevant repertoire, so as to be able to understand the overall situation of the development of the current Chinese ballet theatre art as well as the degree of market acceptance in a point by point manner, and to see the big picture in a small way.

5. Case study approach

Since the creation of the 21st century, Chinese ballet works are very rich repertoire is relatively large, this study will select the outstanding works that have a good reputation in the

industry, the market response is enthusiastic, and can represent the essence of China's current ballet artistic creation to be analysed. Thus, the case study method is adopted to focus on the classics and form a comprehensive observation and reflection on the creation of current Chinese ballet theatre.

6. Observation

The specific research process of this study, in addition to borrowing the relevant theoretical results of the pre-theoretical academic community should also be based on personal understanding and observation, on-site viewing of ballet theatre works or video materials. In the process of observation, objective, detailed, analysis of the 21st century since the Chinese ballet theatre art creation of specific features have a comprehensive knowledge.

7. Research Conclusions and Discussion

The framework culminates in a summary and outlook, offering suggestions for future development of Chinese ballet. This includes implications for artistic innovation, cultural identity, and global positioning of Chinese ballet theatre.

Results

Research Objective 1: To compare the differences between Chinese ballet choreography and performance in the 21st century and that of the previous century, and to analyses the improvement in the speed, intensity and quality of its development.

Finding 1: Expansion and Innovation in Creative Themes Accelerates the Diversification of Chinese Ballet Theatre

1.1 Unlike the works of the last century, which focused mainly on traditional historical and classical themes, the Chinese ballets of the new century cover a wider range of subjects, including contemporary social life, revolutionary history, and themes reflecting the diversity of Chinese culture, making the ballets richer and more innovative.

1.2 The expansion of such themes has accelerated significantly. From 2000 to 2020, not only has a large number of original repertoire emerged, but also, through the contrast and fusion of Chinese and Western themes, the attractiveness of ballet theatre has been enhanced, and the depth of thought and cultural value of the work has been raised.

Finding 2: Enhancement of Performance Quality and Refinement of Artistic Expressions

2.1 In the 21st century, Chinese ballet has made remarkable progress in the refinement of performance, especially in terms of more delicate dramatic expression and emotional conveyance, and more layered portrayal of characters' emotions and psychology. This refinement of expression not only improves the artistic standard of ballet, but also further increases the audience's empathy.

2.2 The enhancement of technical power and the choreographer's polishing of details have led to an overall improvement in the dancers' body control, stage rhythm and artistic infectiousness, and the emergence of a large number of outstanding works has accelerated the recognition of Chinese ballet on the international stage.

Finding 3: Global Dissemination of Chinese Ballet Theatre and Enhancement of International Influence

3.1 Since the 21st century, the Ballet of China has not only made remarkable achievements domestically, but has also actively participated in international performances, enhancing the globalisation of Chinese ballets. Such frequent international exchanges have further enhanced the quality of performances and the global recognition of the ballet.

3.2 In addition, the use of the Internet and new media has enabled more and more Chinese ballets to be disseminated globally, earning Chinese ballet art a higher reputation on the world art stage.

Research Objective 2: To explore the diversified characteristics and changing trends of Chinese ballet in the 21st century in terms of artistic ontological quality, creative language, performance style and social attention.

Finding 4: Incorporating local culture to enhance the uniqueness and cultural connotation of the artwork itself

4.1 The 21st century Chinese ballet has incorporated traditional Chinese cultural symbols into its artistic ontology, such as traditional music elements, stage sets, costume design, etc., which adds to the national flavour and cultural connotation of the work and enables the audience to enjoy a more "Chinese style" of artistic expression through the ballet.

4.2 This innovation and enhancement of the artistic ontology not only maintains the classical aesthetics of ballet, but also enhances the local uniqueness of the work, making Chinese ballet more relevant to the aesthetic needs of Chinese audiences.

Finding 5: Diversity of Creative Languages and Creative Expression

5.1 Ballet in the 21st century has gradually broken through the traditional way of expression in the language of creation, paying more attention to the diversified expression of theatricality and visual effects, and integrating the narrative and emotional expression of traditional Chinese theatre, making the works more flexible in form and content.

5.2 The richness of the creative language is also reflected in the cross-border cooperation, such as theatre, film and television and other forms of art borrowing, which helps the ballet achieve a more three-dimensional and rich artistic expression in the context of the new era.

Finding 6: Increase in social awareness and expansion of audience groups

6.1 Since the 21st century, Chinese ballet theatre has seen a significant rise in social attention, not only becoming an art form of interest to the young population, but also being widely discussed by the media and the academia, and demonstrating a stronger social influence.

6.2 The wide application of emerging media platforms has expanded the dissemination of the ballet, enabling it to reach a wider audience base. Online performance viewing and online interaction have increased audience participation, further enhancing the social recognition and attractiveness of the ballet.

Discussion

Prior to initiating this study, it is imperative to analyze existing academic research on contemporary Chinese ballet theatre to comprehend prevailing perspectives on its development in terms of creation and performance. This includes examining scholarly opinions and suggestions regarding unresolved issues within Chinese ballet theatre. A thorough literature review should consider the evolution of theoretical achievements over time and

incorporate the latest research findings and diverse perspectives from both horizontal and vertical dimensions.

The findings reveal substantial progress in thematic innovation, artistic refinement, and internationalization. These developments demonstrate a marked acceleration in the speed, intensity, and quality of Chinese ballet's growth, alongside significant diversification in its artistic and social dimensions.

1. Expansion and Innovation in Creative Themes

The 21st century has witnessed a pronounced expansion in the creative themes of Chinese ballet theatre. Unlike the 20th century, which was predominantly centered on revolutionary narratives or adaptations of Western classics (Li, 2010), modern Chinese ballets embrace a broader thematic spectrum. This includes contemporary social realities, regional culture, and hybridized East-West content. Works such as The Red Detachment of Women were symbolic of the Maoist period (Chen, 2007), whereas recent productions such as The Light of the Heart and Dunhuang reflect a more inclusive and diversified cultural narrative (Wang, 2019). This thematic diversification not only reflects a broader artistic vision but also responds to the evolving aesthetic demands of modern audiences.

The accelerated emergence of original repertoire between 2000 and 2020 signals a dynamic phase of creative productivity. The interplay of traditional and modern elements, as well as Chinese and Western themes, has enriched the cultural depth of ballet productions and increased their relevance and appeal (Zhou, 2020). This thematic innovation is indicative of a maturing ballet industry that is no longer merely replicating classical forms but is actively generating original content with cultural specificity and universal appeal.

2. Enhancement of Performance Quality and Artistic Expression

The refinement of performance quality has become another key marker of development. Modern Chinese ballet performers demonstrate advanced technical skills coupled with more nuanced dramatic and psychological portrayals (Liu, 2021). Compared to earlier eras, where physical technique often overshadowed emotional depth, contemporary performances emphasize emotional authenticity, layered character development, and refined stagecraft. These improvements elevate the artistic standards of Chinese ballet and promote greater audience empathy (Zhang, 2018).

Moreover, the enhanced stage rhythm, physical expressiveness, and choreographic sophistication are products of increased investment in dancer training and international collaboration (Sun, 2020). The emergence of globally acclaimed productions has bolstered Chinese ballet's recognition on the international stage. Such artistic excellence is not only a result of internal maturation but also of strategic exchanges with global ballet institutions.

3. Global Dissemination and International Recognition

The 21st century marks a pivotal era of internationalization for Chinese ballet. Major troupes such as the National Ballet of China have expanded their international touring circuits, performing in prominent global venues and festivals. These global engagements serve not only as platforms for artistic exchange but also as mechanisms for enhancing China's soft power through cultural diplomacy (Yang & Xu, 2017).

Additionally, the strategic use of digital platforms and new media has expanded the global visibility of Chinese ballet. Online streaming of performances and interactive platforms have made ballet more accessible to global and younger audiences (Tang, 2021). This global dissemination reflects not only the increasing competitiveness of Chinese ballet but also the cultural confidence to present localized art forms on a global scale.

4. Incorporation of Local Cultural Elements

One of the most distinctive trends in 21st-century Chinese ballet is the conscious integration of local cultural symbols. Choreographers and designers are increasingly embedding traditional Chinese music, calligraphy, costumes, and aesthetics into ballet performances, creating a unique artistic ontology (Ma, 2022). This sinicization of ballet does not reject its classical Western roots but rather enriches it with a culturally resonant language that aligns more closely with Chinese audiences' identities and expectations.

Such practices have enabled Chinese ballet to differentiate itself on the global stage. Unlike earlier decades where ballet productions often mimicked Western classics, the new wave of culturally rooted ballet works contributes to the narrative of "cultural self-confidence" in China's contemporary art scene (Zhao, 2020).

5. Diversification in Creative Language and Artistic Expression

Modern Chinese ballet also shows a clear departure from rigid classical structures, embracing theatricality and cross-media artistic expressions. The influence of traditional Chinese opera, as well as collaborations with other art forms like cinema and contemporary dance, has enhanced the visual and narrative dimensions of ballet performances (Gao, 2019). Such cross-disciplinary fusion supports a more flexible, expressive, and emotionally resonant ballet language suited for modern storytelling.

These hybrid forms do not dilute the essence of ballet but instead broaden its expressive scope, allowing creators to explore new aesthetic forms that resonate with contemporary values and multi-layered audiences (Lin, 2018).

6. Rising Social Attention and Expanding Audiences

Finally, the increased social attention and broader audience engagement reflect a significant transformation in ballet's cultural status. No longer confined to elite cultural circles, ballet is increasingly embraced by younger generations and general audiences through digital platforms and social media engagement (Huang, 2021). This rise in popularity has been bolstered by educational outreach, celebrity endorsements, and media discourse that present ballet as both aspirational and accessible.

Online platforms not only enable broader viewership but also foster participatory cultural practices, where audiences share, comment, and interact with content. These developments signal a democratization of ballet consumption and a strategic shift towards audience-centered performance culture.

Current academic research predominantly focuses on the macro-level historical development of Chinese ballet over the past seventy to eighty years since its introduction to China (Muyu, 2017). Scholars have conducted detailed theoretical analyses of ballet works and the overall development of ballet from the perspectives of creators, performers, participants, and audiences. Some have segmented the development of Chinese ballet theatre into distinct

periods for theoretical observation. For instance, the 1980s, marking the beginning of China's reform and opening-up, witnessed a proliferation of ballet theatre works and theoretical research, attracting significant scholarly attention (Feng, 2013). Conversely, the 1990s experienced a developmental bottleneck in Chinese ballet theatre, characterized by fewer new works and limited breakthroughs in content and themes, resulting in a scarcity of theoretical research during that period. The 21st century, however, has seen breakthroughs in creation and performance within Chinese ballet theatre, providing a broader scope for commentary and theoretical research, leading to more profound scholarly insights.

This study distinguishes itself by offering a multi-dimensional, in-depth exploration of the development process of Chinese ballet theatre performance in the 21st century. Unlike existing studies that primarily focus on macro-historical evolution or case analyses, this research provides a comprehensive interpretation of Chinese ballet theatre performances from both dynamic and static perspectives. It includes detailed analyses of variables such as performance styles, creative language, artistic quality, and dissemination effects. Through systematic observation and field research on recent achievements in Chinese ballet theatre choreography and performance, this study reveals specific trends in the performing arts, addressing gaps in existing literature concerning theoretical systematization and practical feedback. Furthermore, it offers practical perspectives and strategic suggestions for the future development of Chinese ballet theatre. This comprehensive research approach not only enriches the depth of theoretical understanding but also provides a solid foundation for the sustainable development of Chinese ballet theatre.

In sum, the findings affirm that Chinese ballet in the 21st century has achieved notable improvements over its 20th-century counterpart in terms of thematic expansion, performance refinement, artistic innovation, and international dissemination. It also highlights the increasing localization of ballet through cultural integration and the diversification of its artistic language and social reach. These dynamic transformations position Chinese ballet as a globally competitive and culturally distinct art form with growing influence and sustainability in the contemporary performing arts landscape.

Conclusion

On the whole, the development of Chinese ballet theatre in the 21st century has shown a prosperous trend of blossoming. There are both adaptations and retellings of classic works, as well as the birth of brand new original works, showing the high standard and quality of Chinese ballet theatre art under the new creative concept and technical level. In order to fully understand the overall development trend of Chinese ballet theatre creation since the 21st century, combined with the current gaps or deficiencies in the theoretical research of this field, this study believes that it is necessary to conduct an all-round observation and in-depth analysis of the existing works of dance theatre art, and summarize the relevant theoretical results. It can truly reflect the whole picture of the current Chinese ballet theatre art as well as the future development trend, and make certain theoretical contributions to the Chinese ballet theatre art.

To sum up, the creation of Chinese ballet theatre has formed a good development trend, especially since the 21st century, the creation of ballet theatre art has become more and more prosperous, forming a stage development climax. The emergence of a large number of works

and the stage practice of a large number of reserve talents have pushed the art of Chinese ballet theatre to maintain the momentum of sustainable development in the future. At the same time, the newly created repertoire has a wide range of themes and contents, and has also revealed many new artistic concepts and creative thinking. Therefore, it is of great significance to systematically summaries the development results of the past 20 years to understand the internal mechanism and the new artistic style, and it is also of clear value and significance to the subsequent theoretical research and stage practice of Chinese ballet theatre.

Recommendations

1. Consolidated recommendations

In order to promote the innovation and sustainable development of Chinese ballet, it is suggested that more attention be paid to the excavation of traditional cultural elements and the fusion of modern artistic expressions in the creative process. Specifically, on the basis of maintaining the essence of classical ballet techniques, cultural symbols and story elements rich in Chinese characteristics should be incorporated, so that the works presented not only conform to the artistic norms of traditional ballet, but also possess the unique temperament of Chinese culture. In addition, interdisciplinary and inter-artistic cooperation should be encouraged, such as drawing on theatre, film, digital art and other techniques to further enhance the expressiveness and diversity of the ballet. Such artistic exploration not only helps to enhance the artistic quality and infectiousness of the work, but also effectively attracts modern audiences and enhances their viewing experience, thus expanding the influence of ballet theatre among Chinese audiences.

2. Suggestions for future research

Future research could explore more systematically the development path of Chinese ballet in the context of globalisation, including how to enhance its visibility and cultural influence on the international stage. Specifically, it is recommended to focus on how to maintain the cultural uniqueness of Chinese ballet in its creation, while adapting to the appreciation habits of international audiences, in order to attract audiences from more diverse cultural backgrounds and age levels. In addition, it is suggested that in-depth research be conducted on the application of emerging technologies in ballet theatre, such as virtual reality, augmented reality and digital stage design, in order to explore how they can enhance the expressiveness and innovation of ballet art. By exploring the deep integration of technology and art, the study will provide new perspectives and directions for the future development of Chinese ballet theatre in terms of stage performance, communication methods and audience interaction.

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