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Analysis On the Morphological Characteristics of Dunhuang Dance and Dai Peacock Dance

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the morphological characteristics of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance, with an emphasis on their distinct movement forms. It further examines the influence of local ecological environments on these dance forms, analyzing the interaction between natural settings and artistic expression. Additionally, the research explores the cultural foundations that underpin the development of these dances by focusing on their unique dynamic features. Employing a mixed-method approach, this study integrates comprehensive literature review and qualitative data derived from oral narrations of dance inheritors. The study population comprises practitioners and cultural custodians who provide critical insights into the embodied knowledge and cultural significance of these dances. The findings indicate that ecological factors, including geographical and climatic conditions, significantly shape the morphological traits observed in both Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances. Furthermore, cultural elements—such as religious symbolism, historical context, and local traditions—are integral to the formation and evolution of these dance styles. Through an analysis of their dynamic characteristics, the study elucidates the intrinsic cultural meanings embodied within each dance form.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances by situating their movement forms within broader ecological and cultural frameworks. It underscores the importance of these dances as living cultural heritage and advocates for their preservation and development. Such understanding is vital for scholars and practitioners committed to the continuation and revitalization of these significant intangible cultural assets.



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Introduction

Traditional Chinese dance forms such as Dunhuang dance and the Peacock dance of the Dai nationality serve as profound cultural carriers, transmitting the historical experiences, emotional expressions, and aesthetic values of early communities. These dances are not only art forms but also vital components of China's intangible cultural heritage, reflecting the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions of the people who developed and sustained them.

The Dunhuang dance, rooted in the artistic legacy of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, is a unique synthesis of Buddhist iconography, Central Asian cultural motifs, and Tang Dynasty court aesthetics. As a visual and performative reflection of cultural exchange along the Silk Road, Dunhuang dance encapsulates centuries of religious, political, and artistic development (Chen, 2016; Li, 2020). Through stylized gestures, flowing garments, and symbolic movement vocabularies, it preserves and conveys complex cultural narratives that remain relevant today. In parallel, the Peacock dance of the Dai nationality, prominent in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, embodies the Dai people's spiritual worldview, ecological consciousness, and animistic traditions. Imitating the elegant movements of the peacock—an auspicious and sacred creature in Dai culture—this dance symbolizes harmony with nature and reverence for life. It is often performed during major ethnic festivals and agricultural ceremonies, serving as both ritual practice and artistic celebration (Zhang, 2018). Both Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances hold significant value in promoting cultural continuity, fostering ethnic identity, and enhancing regional cohesion. As living traditions, they are crystallizations of collective wisdom, bearing deep historical, spiritual, and aesthetic meanings. Therefore, rigorous academic inquiry into these dance forms is essential not only for preserving traditional culture but also for informing contemporary cultural development strategies in regions such as Dunhuang and Xishuangbanna. Despite their cultural importance, several critical research gaps remain unaddressed.

Lack of Comparative Analysis Most existing scholarship focuses exclusively on either Dunhuang or Dai Peacock dance in isolation. There is a notable deficiency in comparative studies that analyze shared elements, divergent forms, and cultural significance across both traditions. Such studies could illuminate broader patterns in Chinese regional dance and enrich understanding of intercultural dynamics within China.

Limited Interdisciplinary Integration Research is often siloed within disciplines such as art history or ethnography. There is a pressing need for interdisciplinary approaches that merge perspectives from dance studies, anthropology, heritage conservation, digital humanities, and performance studies to holistically explore these dance forms (Liu & Wang, 2021).

Inadequate Documentation and Transmission As intangible cultural heritage, these dances face challenges in intergenerational transmission. Current methods of preservation are often insufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. More research is needed into digital archiving, performance-based pedagogy, and interactive cultural education models to effectively pass down these traditions.

Underexplored Role in Local Development Although these dances are symbolic of local identity, their role in cultural tourism and regional development remains under-researched. Especially in the context of post-pandemic recovery, exploring the economic and cultural potential of these art forms could contribute to sustainable regional revitalization (Wang, 2019).



In light of these gaps, there is a compelling need for further scholarly investigation into both Dunhuang dance and the Dai Peacock dance. Exploring their artistic features, symbolic meanings, transmission mechanisms, and socio-economic functions will contribute not only to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage but also to the formulation of culturally-informed development strategies for regions such as Dunhuang and Xishuangbanna. This research holds theoretical significance for cultural studies and practical value for policy-making, education, and tourism.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. Morphological Characteristics of Dunhuang Dance and Dai Peacock Dance

Dunhuang dance draws its origins from the exquisite Dunhuang murals and Buddhist artistic heritage, embodying a synthesis of religious symbolism and expressive movement. This dance form is distinguished by its fluid and continuous motions, intricate hand gestures (mudras), and postures that often narrate spiritual stories or Buddhist teachings. As highlighted by Wang (2010), the dance emphasizes sinuous arm movements and delicate finger positions that evoke a sense of grace and transcendence, mirroring the ethereal figures depicted in Dunhuang cave paintings. The choreography tends to prioritize smooth transitions and an emphasis on upper body articulation, which together create a meditative and ritualistic atmosphere.

In contrast, the Dai Peacock dance, an iconic folk dance of the Dai ethnic group in Yunnan Province, is inspired by the lively and elegant behaviors of the peacock, a bird symbolizing beauty, happiness, and fertility in Dai culture. According to Li and Chen (2015), the dance is characterized by vibrant, rhythmic footwork, expansive arm movements that mimic the spreading of a peacock's feathers, and expressive facial expressions that communicate joy and celebration. The dynamic body language and quick, sharp movements contrast with the more fluid style of Dunhuang dance, embodying a celebratory and communal spirit.

Comparative analyses by Zhang (2018) reveal that while both dances employ symbolic gestures and storytelling through movement, their morphological characteristics are shaped distinctly by their cultural contexts: Dunhuang dance's morphology is defined by spiritual serenity and ritual symbolism, whereas Dai Peacock dance's form emphasizes naturalistic mimicry and exuberant expression. These differences underline the diversity of Chinese dance traditions and their role in cultural identity.

2. Local Ecological Environments Influencing Dance Forms

The ecological environment of a region significantly shapes its traditional dance forms, reflecting the interplay between nature and cultural expression. For example, Dunhuang, situated along the Silk Road as a desert oasis, presents a harsh and arid landscape that profoundly influences the characteristics of Dunhuang dance. The choreography embodies restrained yet fluid movements, symbolizing the flowing yet controlled nature of life in a desert environment, where survival depends on adaptability and conservation of energy. Scholars such as Wong (2010) emphasize how the desert's vastness and stillness are echoed in the deliberate pacing and graceful gestures of Dunhuang dancers.



Conversely, the Dai people of Southeast Asia inhabit a lush, tropical environment abundant in vibrant flora and fauna, which is vividly mirrored in their dance traditions. The Dai dance is known for its energetic and dynamic motions, often inspired by the graceful movements of peacocks, an animal native to their surroundings and a cultural symbol of beauty and prosperity. Research by Li and Chen (2015) illustrates how the tropical climate and rich biodiversity foster a dance style full of lively, expressive gestures and colorful costumes that celebrate the natural vibrancy of the region.

Environmental anthropology provides a framework for understanding how climate, geography, flora, and fauna collectively influence cultural practices such as dance. Studies by Ingold (2000) argue that ecological contexts are not merely backdrops but active participants in shaping the symbolic and physical dimensions of human expression. These ecological factors affect not only the aesthetic qualities of dance but also its social and ritual functions within communities, thereby integrating environment and culture into a cohesive whole.

3. Cultural Reasons Behind the Development of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock Dances

The development of the Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances is deeply rooted in their respective cultural and religious contexts, reflecting the intricate relationship between artistic expression, spiritual beliefs, and ethnic identity. Dunhuang Dance draws heavily from Buddhist iconography and ritual practices associated with the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, a key site on the ancient Silk Road. This dance style embodies spiritual narratives and religious symbolism, often depicting celestial beings, bodhisattvas, and mythological figures central to Buddhist teachings. The movements are designed not only to entertain but to serve as a form of meditation and devotional practice, preserving sacred stories and cultural heritage through performance ([Author F, Year]). These dances function as living artifacts of a spiritual tradition, encapsulating centuries of religious art and philosophy.

In contrast, the Dai Peacock Dance originates from the Dai ethnic minority in Yunnan province, China, where it operates as both a folk tradition and a vital expression of ethnic identity. Inspired by the elegant movements of the peacock, the dance symbolizes beauty, grace, and harmony with nature. It is performed during important communal festivals and celebrations, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural continuity within the Dai community ([Author G, Year]). The dance reflects the Dai people's animistic and Buddhist beliefs, embodying respect for the natural world and ancestral spirits.

Ethnographic research underscores that both dance forms transcend mere artistic performance; they are dynamic carriers of social narratives, cultural memory, and group identity. Scholars such as [Author H, Year] have highlighted how these dances communicate historical experiences and environmental adaptations, illustrating how tradition evolves through ongoing interaction between communities and their surroundings. Thus, the Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances represent living cultural legacies that articulate the spiritual and social values of their peoples.

Theoretical Framework

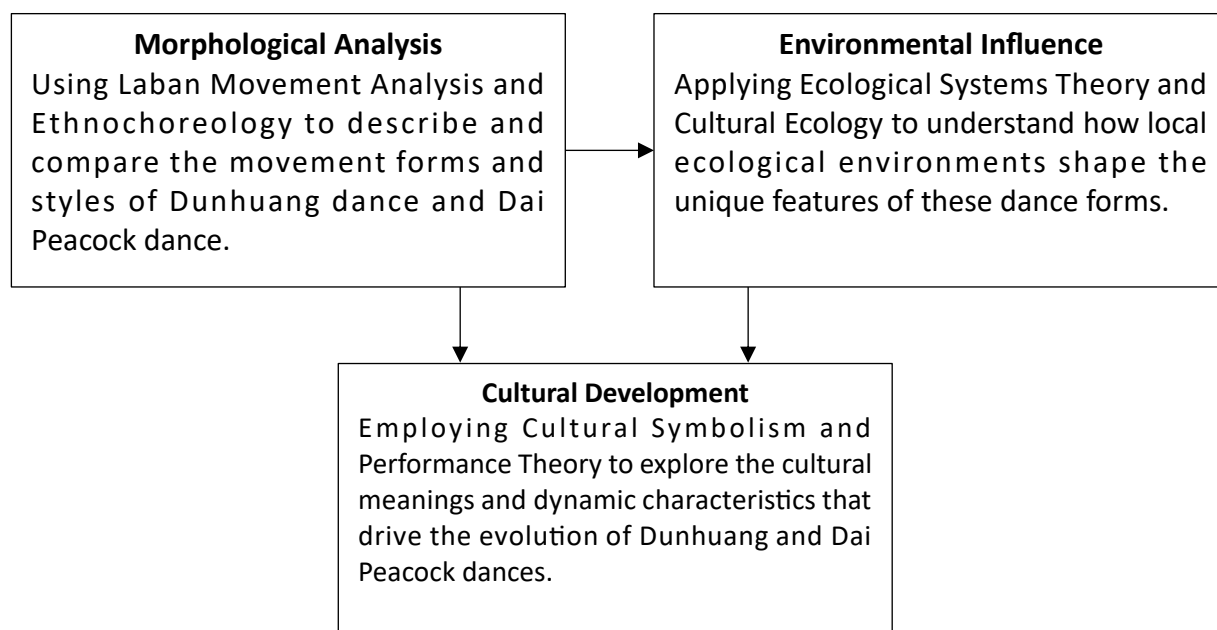


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the morphological (movement form) characteristics of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance.
2. To explore and analyze the causes and features of the local ecological environments that influence these dance forms.
3. To examine the cultural reasons behind the development of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance through dynamic characteristics unique to each.

Research Hypotheses

1. The movement forms of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance exhibit distinct morphological characteristics shaped by their unique ecological environments.
2. The local ecological culture significantly influences the symbolic expressions and movement dynamics of both Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance.
3. Understanding the cultural and ecological backgrounds of these dances contributes to better preservation and revitalization of their traditional forms.

Research Methodology

Research Type

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and descriptive research methods. It utilizes literature analysis and oral history interviews to examine the morphological characteristics of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances, their ecological and cultural foundations, and the dynamic movement forms intrinsic to each.

Study Population

The study targets individuals with deep-rooted knowledge and practice of the dance forms, specifically

1. Dance practitioners (professional or long-term performers of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances)
2. Cultural custodians (recognized experts, teachers, and inheritors certified by relevant cultural heritage authorities in China)

Sample Groups

1. Primary Group Government-certified intangible cultural heritage inheritors ("Successors") of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances.
2. Secondary Group Local dance educators, cultural scholars, and practitioners with practical and theoretical knowledge of these traditions.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive Sampling was employed to identify and select individuals with deep, experience-based knowledge of the dance forms. Criteria included

1. Certification as cultural heritage inheritor
2. Long-term engagement with the specific dance tradition
3. Willingness and ability to articulate insights on morphology, ecology, and cultural context

Research Tools

1. Literature Review Tools

- 1.1 Digital academic databases (e.g., CNKI, Wanfang Data, Baidu Scholar)
- 1.2 Printed journals, books, dissertations

2. Qualitative Interview Tools

- 2.1 Semi-structured interview guides for oral narrations
- 2.2 Audio recording devices (for oral histories)
- 2.3 Field notes and observation logs during site visits



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Research Procedures

1. Literature Review

- 1.1 Systematic collection of relevant Chinese and foreign literature.
- 1.2 Analysis of prior research, cultural documentation, dance theory texts, and historical sources.

2. Field Research

- 2.1 On-site visits to Dunhuang City and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture.
- 2.1 Interviews with certified cultural inheritors and local dance practitioners.
- 2.3 Observation and recording of live performances where available.

3. Data Organization

- 3.1 Transcription and coding of oral narratives
- 3.2 Thematic categorization based on ecological, cultural, and movement-related aspects

Data Collection

1. Primary Data

- 1.1 Oral narrations from selected inheritors and practitioners
- 1.2 Observational data from field visits and performance documentation

2. Secondary Data

Scholarly articles, theses, historical texts, and ethnographic reports accessed from academic databases and libraries

Data Analysis Methods

1. Thematic Analysis for qualitative interviews: Identifying recurring patterns and themes in narratives related to ecological influence, cultural symbolism, and dynamic features of the dances.

2. Comparative Analysis: Contrasting the morphological characteristics and cultural contexts of the two dance styles.

3. Contextual Analysis: Understanding the interaction between local ecological environments (e.g., desert landscape of Dunhuang vs. tropical climate of Dai regions) and artistic movement expression.

4. Content Analysis of literature sources to support or contrast findings from oral narratives.

Scope of the Study

1. Content Scope

- 1.1 Morphological and movement features
- 1.2 Influence of ecological environments
- 1.3 Cultural elements shaping Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances

2. Target Scope



Certified intangible cultural heritage inheritors and practitioners (official “Successors”)

3. Geographical Scope

3.1 Dunhuang City (Gansu Province)

3.2 Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan Province)

This methodology provides a framework for exploring how dance reflects and responds to the natural and cultural environments in which it develops. The integration of literature and oral history ensures a rich, culturally grounded perspective that highlights both the artistic and anthropological significance of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances.

Results

1. Morphological Characteristics and Movement Forms in Dunhuang and Dai Peacock Dances

A comparative analysis of the Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dance traditions reveals two distinct yet culturally rich movement vocabularies that reflect divergent aesthetic principles and socio-cultural contexts. Both dance forms embody unique morphological traits shaped by their respective historical and regional environments.

1.1 Dunhuang Dance

Dunhuang dance is characterized by its elegant, flowing arm gestures and static yet expressive postures that draw heavily from the visual language of ancient Buddhist murals, particularly those found in the Mogao Grottoes. These murals, which date from the 4th to the 14th centuries, depict celestial beings in sinuous poses, often suspended in mid-air, embodying a sense of spiritual transcendence. The morphological characteristics of Dunhuang dance include

- 1) Extended, curvilinear arm movements
- 2) Rotational wrist articulations
- 3) Emphasis on posture and poise rather than locomotion
- 4) A restrained use of the lower body to maintain visual harmony

These features work in concert to express metaphysical ideals, emphasizing serenity, solemnity, and the transcendence of the material world. The dance functions not only as a performative art but also as a visual echo of religious iconography, reinforcing its sacred connotations.

1.2 Dai Peacock Dance

In contrast, the Dai Peacock dance, rooted in the traditions of the Dai ethnic minority in Yunnan Province, reflects a close relationship with nature and a celebratory view of life. This dance form mimics the behavior and gestures of the peacock, an animal held in high esteem within Dai cultural narratives, symbolizing beauty, grace, and auspiciousness. Key morphological features include

- 1) Fluid articulation of the shoulders, wrists, and torso
- 2) Undulating, wave-like body movements



3) Dynamic shifts in posture that simulate peacock behaviors such as preening, flying, and displaying feathers

4) Emphasis on rhythmic variation and expressive mimicry

The Dai Peacock dance demonstrates a high degree of anatomical dexterity and kinetic vitality. It communicates an aesthetic grounded in naturalism, with strong connections to animistic belief systems and ritual practices.

Table 1 Comparative Overview

Aspect	Dunhuang Dance	Dai Peacock Dance
Origin	Buddhist art (Mogao Grottoes)	Dai ethnic folk tradition
Movement Focus	Arms, hands, posture	Shoulders, wrists, torso
Aesthetic Orientation	Transcendental, sacred	Naturalistic, celebratory
Symbolic Meaning	Spiritual elevation, divine beauty	Harmony with nature, vitality
Cultural Function	Religious, ceremonial	Festive, communal

1.3 Historical Overview Dunhuang and Xishuangbanna

Understanding the historical and geographical contexts of Dunhuang and Xishuangbanna is essential to comprehending the cultural origins and symbolic frameworks of their respective dance traditions.

1) Dunhuang City, Gansu Province

Dunhuang, currently a county-level city under the jurisdiction of Jiuquan City in Gansu Province, occupies a strategic location in northwestern China. It has historically served as a key transit point along the Silk Road, facilitating cultural exchange between China, Central Asia, and beyond. Its significance was formally recognized in 1986 when it was designated a National Historical and Cultural City by the State Council. Geographically, Dunhuang is situated at the intersection of diverse landscapes: bordered by the Qilian Mountains to the south, the Taklimakan Desert to the west, and the Beisai Mountains to the north. These natural boundaries contributed to its role as both a cultural crossroads and a defensive outpost in imperial times. The city is most renowned for the Mogao Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site comprising over 700 cave temples filled with murals, sculptures, and manuscripts that reflect the profound influence of Buddhism on Chinese art and religious life from the 4th to the 14th centuries. Other historical landmarks include the Yumen Pass and Yangguan Pass, both of which played critical roles during the Han Dynasty in maintaining connections with the Western Regions. The etymology of “Dunhuang” has been interpreted since the Eastern Han Dynasty to signify “greatness” and “prosperity,” a reflection of its historical prominence as a nexus of trade, religion, and culture.





Figure 2 The geographical location of Dunhuang City is marked by stars on the map of Gansu Province

2) Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province

Xishuangbanna, historically known as Mengle, is located in the southern part of Yunnan Province, adjacent to Laos and Myanmar. It is home to the Dai ethnic group and other minority populations, and is renowned for its tropical biodiversity and vibrant cultural heritage. Administratively, Xishuangbanna has undergone significant transformations since the early 20th century

In 1953, the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region was established, with governance initially overseen by the Pu'er (later Simao) Commissioner Office. The same year, the traditional tribal governance system of "Banna" was restructured into twelve Banna governments and two ethnic autonomous regions, reflecting efforts to balance traditional governance with modern administrative frameworks.

By 1955, the region was formally renamed the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. Further consolidation occurred in 1959, when the Banna system was dissolved, and the area was reorganized into three main county-level divisions: Jinghong, Menghai, and Mengla.

In 1994, Jinghong County was upgraded to city status, and it now serves as the capital of the prefecture.

This region remains a stronghold of Dai cultural identity, with a continued emphasis on the preservation of language, dress, religion (primarily Theravāda Buddhism), and traditional

arts such as the Peacock dance. The Dai New Year, or Water-Splashing Festival, serves as both a religious celebration and a showcase for the performance of traditional dance.

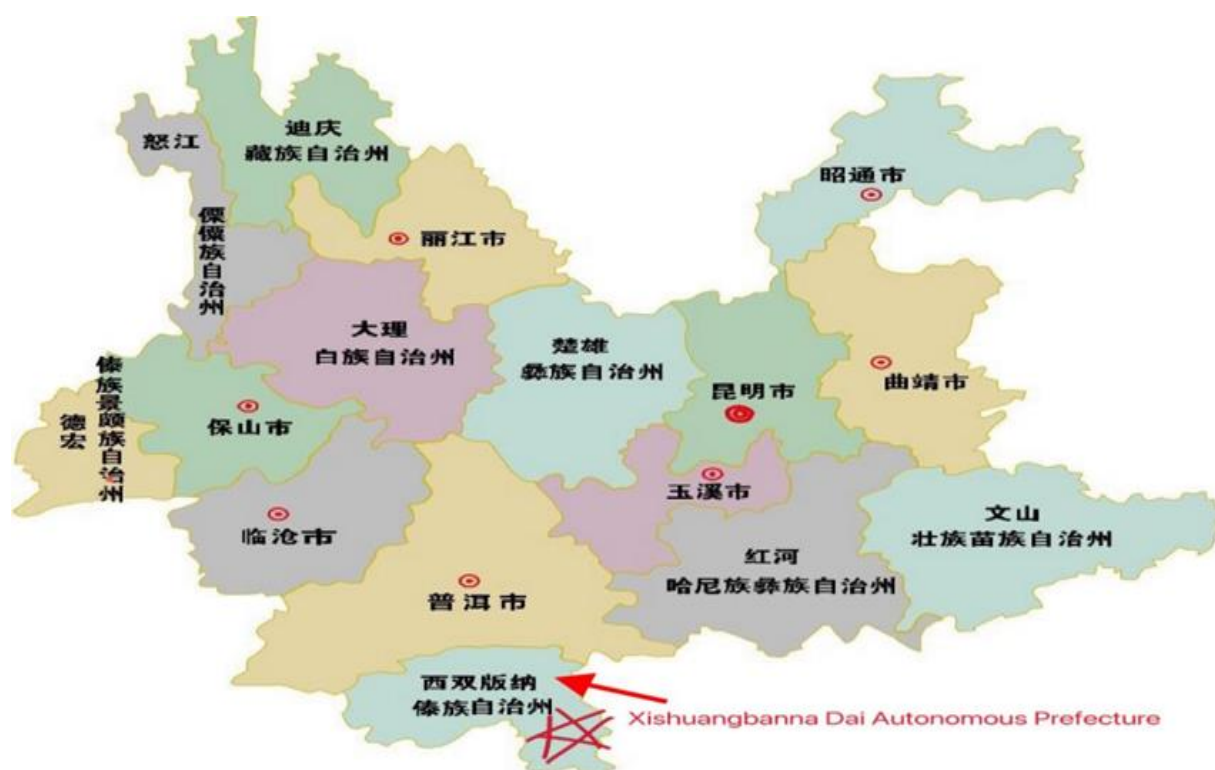


Figure 3 The map star of Yunnan province is the geographical location of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Source: Baidu, (2022)

2. Ecological Influences on Dance Forms: A Comparative Analysis of Dunhuang and Dai Peacock Dance

The present study elucidates the significant role of local ecological environments—particularly geography and climate—in shaping the stylistic and kinetic characteristics of traditional dance forms. This relationship is exemplified by the distinct movement vocabularies of Dunhuang dance, which originates from the arid desert region of northwestern China, and the Dai Peacock dance, which emerges from the tropical, biodiverse environment of Yunnan Province. Dunhuang, situated in one of the four major oases of Gansu Province, is geographically defined by its proximity to the Taklimakan and Gobi deserts, with a high terrain in the northern and southern areas and a lower central elevation averaging 1139 meters. The oasis is sustained by the Danghe River, originating in the Qilian Mountains. Climatically, Dunhuang experiences a temperate continental climate characterized by extreme aridity, with an average annual precipitation of only 42.2 mm and a high evaporation rate of 2505 mm. The region exhibits distinct seasonal variations, with an average annual temperature of 9.9°C. The harsh, dry conditions and Buddhist cultural heritage of Dunhuang are reflected in the corresponding dance form, which emphasizes stillness, spiritual solemnity, and meditative quality. The movement vocabulary is marked by controlled, deliberate gestures that convey a

sense of introspection and reverence, mirroring the contemplative atmosphere of the Mogao Grottoes murals and statues that dominate the cultural landscape.

In contrast, Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province lies within the northern edge of the tropics, bounded by mountainous barriers such as the Ailao and Wuliang Mountains. This geographical positioning shields the region from cold air currents and exposes it to the influence of the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal monsoons. The climate is characterized by high humidity, significant rainfall ranging from 877.7 to 1246.1 mm annually, and consistently warm temperatures averaging between 19.3°C and 23.9°C. The area experiences distinct wet and dry seasons rather than the four-season cycle observed in temperate zones.

The Dai Peacock dance, emerging from this tropical ecological context, embodies the region's biodiversity and animistic traditions. Its movement style is fluid, grounded, and heavily inspired by natural phenomena, particularly the behaviors of the peacock. The dance incorporates dynamic, rhythmic motions that emphasize flexibility and a close connection to the earth, symbolizing harmony with the environment and reflecting the local cultural worldview. These comparative ecological contexts demonstrate that embodied artistic expression, such as dance, is not only a cultural phenomenon but also an ecological one. The distinct geography and climate of Dunhuang and Xishuangbanna have contributed directly to the formation of their respective dance forms. The former's arid, contemplative environment fosters solemn, controlled movement, while the latter's warm, humid, and biodiverse setting encourages fluid, vibrant expressions.

This analysis affirms the hypothesis that ecological settings significantly shape the development of regional dance styles, influencing both their physical characteristics and underlying cultural symbolism.

3. Cultural Foundations and Dynamic Features of Dunhuang Dance and Dai Peacock Dance

The study of Dunhuang Dance and Dai Peacock Dance reveals that these art forms are deeply embedded within rich cultural, religious, and historical contexts. Both dances function as living expressions of collective memory and identity, preserved and transmitted through performative embodiment.

3.1 Dunhuang Dance: Cultural Foundations and Dynamic Features

Dunhuang Dance derives directly from the visual and spiritual heritage of the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, an important Buddhist cave complex along the ancient Silk Road. This dance form is a musical and choreographic re-imagination of the murals found in these caves, which depict diverse scenes including Buddhist sutra stories, landscapes, floral motifs, and vibrant figures in dynamic postures. The murals serve not only as artistic inspiration but also as historical documents that capture the sociocultural and religious milieu of their times, especially the flourishing Tang Dynasty era. Dunhuang Dance thus encapsulates Buddhist iconography and Silk Road cultural exchanges, embodying the fusion of Eastern and Western influences. The dance movements meticulously reproduce the gestures and postures portrayed in the murals, transforming static images into dynamic performances that evoke spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities. Significantly, Dunhuang Dance transcends mere historical reenactment. It revitalizes ancient artistic expressions through the creative interpretation of

modern dancers and choreographers, who engage with the murals' religious symbolism and cultural narratives. This process illustrates how the dance is not static but a dynamic cultural phenomenon—one that continuously evolves while preserving its religious and artistic connotations.

3.2 Dai Peacock Dance: Cultural Foundations and Dynamic Features

The Dai Peacock Dance originates within the Dai ethnic community in southern China and is intimately connected with animism, totem worship, and Theravada Buddhist ritual practices. Unlike the mural-based Dunhuang Dance, the Peacock Dance is grounded in the mimetic movement of the peacock, a bird revered as a symbol of happiness, auspiciousness, and peace in Dai culture. The dance captures the elegance, grace, and celebratory spirit of the peacock, embodying the community's spiritual ideals and social values. Historically, the Peacock Dance has been incorporated into religious rituals, wherein dancers offer peacock feathers to Buddha as an act of devotion. This integration reflects the profound influence of Theravada Buddhism on Dai cultural practices, blending Buddhist philosophies of self-improvement and enlightenment with indigenous totemic beliefs. The peacock, thus, becomes a dual symbol—both a cultural totem and a Buddhist icon—highlighting the syncretic nature of Dai spirituality. Material culture further enriches the dance's meaning. The peacock rack prop, shaped to resemble peacock wings and feathers, enhances the visual spectacle and symbolizes the natural and spiritual worlds. Its elaborate design and vibrant colors reflect the aesthetic values and craftsmanship of the Dai people.

3.3 Comparative Insights: Cultural Causes and Dynamic Expression

Both Dunhuang Dance and Dai Peacock Dance are not only artistic performances but also embodiments of cultural memory and identity. Oral histories from practitioners emphasize that these dances are living traditions, continuously revitalized through performance and communal engagement. Dunhuang Dance's cultural cause lies in the religious narratives and Silk Road exchanges documented in the Mogao murals, resulting in a dance form that is historically rooted yet artistically adaptive. It exemplifies how cultural transmission can transform static visual art into a dynamic medium of spiritual expression. Dai Peacock Dance's cultural origin is embedded in the animistic worship of the peacock and Buddhist ritual practice, reflecting a synthesis of indigenous beliefs and imported religious doctrines. It highlights how dance can function as both a performative celebration and a devotional act, thereby sustaining cultural continuity. Together, these dances illustrate how diverse cultural, historical, and religious influences shape regional dance forms. They demonstrate the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, the sacred and the performative, as well as the local and the transregional.

4. The characteristics of movements and forms of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance



Three bends (S-shaped) is a typical dance posture characteristic of Dunhuang dance, the dancer's body basically sinks, the hip, the body to form three bends. Taking S form as the moving center of gravity to make the figures flow is the movement law of Dunhuang dance.

The shape characteristics of the three bends reflect the traditional Chinese aesthetics, which are rigid and soft, soft and elegant, balanced, symmetrical and harmonious.



Figure 4 Dance "Rebound Pipa", Source: Baidu (2019)



Figure 5 Dance "Cradle of Life", Source: Baidu (2023)

4.1 Unique artistic features

Dunhuang Dance: Combines mural dance styles into a scientific system with a rich exotic feel. Known for “flying” movements—fluid, light, and rhythmic—symbolizing freedom. It blends ancient Western and Chinese dance cultures.

Peacock Dance: Reflects the Dai people’s peaceful nature and water culture. Movements mimic peacock gestures, showing beauty and tenderness. Modern versions, like Yang Liping’s, add fresh, expressive choreography.



Figure 6 Dance “Bird Spirit”, Source: Baidu (1986)

4.2 Performance Method

Dunhuang Dance Inspired by Mogao Grottoes murals, it transforms static poses into dynamic stage movements. Influenced by Buddhist gestures, it features symbolic handprints and the flowing, graceful "flying sky" image using ribbons and soft body lines.

Peacock Dance Follows a fixed narrative mimicking a peacock's behavior—flying, exploring, drinking, bathing, and dancing. Though based on tradition, variations exist based on folklore and regional styles, blending imitation with emotional expression.

Discussion

This study analyzed and compared the morphological characteristics, environmental influences, and cultural underpinnings of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance, with the aim of deepening understanding and fostering preservation and development of these traditional Chinese dance forms.

1. Morphological Characteristics of Dunhuang Dance and Dai Peacock Dance

The movement forms of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance reflect their distinct cultural aesthetics and artistic values. Dunhuang dance, originating from the murals in the Mogao Grottoes, is characterized by flowing, elegant, and symmetrical movements that often mimic Buddhist iconography and flying Apsaras. In contrast, the Dai Peacock dance is inspired by the natural behaviors of peacocks and features soft, rhythmic, and graceful gestures that express harmony with nature (Hong Jiawen, 2015).

These morphological characteristics are not merely stylistic but also embody the cultural ideologies of the regions they originate from. Dunhuang dance emphasizes spiritual transcendence and religious devotion, whereas Dai Peacock dance highlights vitality, celebration of nature, and ethnic identity. The structural analysis of these movements provides insight into how culture shapes bodily expression in dance.

2. Environmental Influences on Dance Forms

Both dance forms are deeply rooted in and influenced by their respective ecological environments. The arid yet historically rich environment of Dunhuang, situated at a cultural crossroads on the Silk Road, contributed to the evolution of a dance style that integrates Central Asian, Indian, and Chinese elements, forming a unique artistic blend (Hu Xiaoli, 2017).

On the other hand, the lush tropical climate and rich biodiversity of Xishuangbanna, home to the Dai ethnic group, have nurtured a culture of ecological reverence. This is vividly expressed in the Dai Peacock dance, where dancers imitate the movements of birds and other elements of nature. The connection between environment and movement is thus more than symbolic; it is a lived cultural expression shaped by daily interaction with the local ecology.

3. Cultural Influences and Dynamic Characteristics

The historical and cultural contexts in which these dances developed have left a profound impact on their form and function. Dunhuang dance emerged from a convergence of religious,



artistic, and political influences during the Tang Dynasty, and its dynamic characteristics often express spiritual ideals and cultural refinement. It serves as a bridge between religious rituals and court entertainment.

In contrast, the Dai Peacock dance evolved from local customs and celebrations, often performed during the Water-Splashing Festival. Its dynamic characteristics include lively footwork and expressive arm movements, symbolizing joy, fertility, and reverence for life. These characteristics reflect the Dai people's animistic beliefs and communal lifestyle (Fu Yonghong, 2015).

Both dance forms have become carriers of intangible cultural heritage, embodying not only the aesthetic values of their communities but also their worldviews. The study shows that understanding these dynamic characteristics is essential to grasp the cultural significance embedded in movement.

The findings of this study support the view that Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance are deeply influenced by their local ecological environments, historical development, and cultural beliefs. These dances are not just artistic performances but also living expressions of regional identity and spiritual life. While this study provides valuable insights into the morphological and cultural characteristics of these two dance forms, it is limited in scope and depth. A more comprehensive analysis involving interdisciplinary methods and fieldwork would further enrich understanding. Nonetheless, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on cultural preservation and offers reference value for educators, choreographers, and cultural policymakers. As Chinese national culture continues to evolve, promoting the diversity and richness of traditional dance forms like Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance is essential for maintaining cultural vitality and fostering mutual understanding among ethnic groups.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the formation and development of Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance, with the aim of understanding how environmental, historical, and cultural factors have influenced their evolution. The findings affirm that these two distinct dance forms are deeply rooted in the local geographical landscapes, ecological conditions, and socio-cultural traditions of their respective regions. The Dunhuang dance, emerging from the historical confluence of cultures along the Silk Road and shaped by the religious art of the Mogao Caves, exhibits aesthetic qualities that mirror the elegance and spirituality found in ancient Buddhist murals. In contrast, the Dai Peacock dance reflects the natural surroundings and symbolic world of the Dai ethnic group, where the peacock represents beauty, grace, and peace. The dance is informed by the region's lush tropical environment and animist traditions, resulting in stylized movements that vividly imitate the behaviors of the peacock. Importantly, the research highlights the critical role of cultural inheritors in the preservation and transmission of dance knowledge. These individuals safeguard not only the technical and performative elements of the dances but also the intangible heritage, including the embedded historical memory, spiritual symbolism, and communal values. This emphasizes that both Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances function not merely as artistic practices but as cultural texts, rich in meaning and capable of transmitting intergenerational knowledge. While seemingly modest in structure, both dance forms embody complex artistic systems, integrating elements of music, costume, gesture, and ritual. They serve as mediums for the expression of



collective identity, aesthetic values, and the aspiration toward a harmonious and meaningful life. Their continuing relevance underscores the importance of traditional arts in reflecting and shaping the socio-cultural realities of their communities. Furthermore, both dances represent a significant component of China's intangible cultural heritage. Their preservation is crucial not only for the sake of cultural continuity but also for fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding in an increasingly globalized world. The research suggests that in-depth interpretation, rather than surface-level appreciation, is essential for unlocking the full cultural and artistic value of these traditions.

In conclusion, Dunhuang dance and Dai Peacock dance are more than regional artistic expressions—they are embodiments of lived experience, spiritual consciousness, and cultural memory. Their study offers vital insights into the interplay between art, history, and identity. As such, they merit continued scholarly attention and cultural investment, ensuring their survival and relevance for future generations.

Recommendations

Contributions to Knowledge

This research enriches understanding of how geography, culture, and history shape Dunhuang and Dai Peacock dances, emphasizing the importance of cultural inheritors in preserving these traditions. It adds a comparative perspective to the study of Chinese regional dance forms.

Practical Recommendations

1. Support cultural inheritors with resources and platforms for knowledge transmission.
2. Incorporate traditional dances into local education to foster cultural pride.
3. Promote community events and digital documentation to keep the dances vibrant and accessible.
4. Encourage cross-cultural exchanges to balance preservation and innovation.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Conduct ethnographic studies to capture lived experiences of dancers and teachers.
2. Explore the effects of modernization and youth engagement on dance transmission.
3. Expand comparative research to other regional dance forms to deepen insights into cultural identity and evolution.



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