

An Analysis of the Rise of Chinese Dance Theater in the 20th Century

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Keywords: Dance Theater, 20th Century, Chinese Dance Theater, May Fourth Movement, Reform and Opening-Up

Abstract: In the late 20th century and early 21st century, Chinese dance theater is experiencing a golden period of innovation and development. Numerous young dance creators and directors are boldly experimenting by integrating traditional dance elements with modern artistic techniques, creating a series of dance works that not only embody Chinese cultural characteristics but also showcase an international artistic perspective. These innovative works have not only garnered widespread attention domestically but have also earned acclaim in the international dance arena. In this context, we will focus on exploring the transformations and developments of 20th-century Chinese dance theater under the influence of Western artistic forms. Particularly, we will examine how dance art has responded to and integrated these new artistic elements, especially against the backdrop of the reforms and opening-up, shaping the unique form of dance theater that we witness today.

1. Introduction

The rise of Chinese dance theater is closely intertwined with the economic and cultural development of the nation. In the early 20th century, as China's modernization process accelerated, dance arts began to undergo profound influences from Western artistic forms. During this period, Chinese dance arts exhibited a rich developmental trajectory, with each historical stage possessing distinctive artistic characteristics and innovations.

During the May Fourth Movement, China experienced an unprecedented cultural transformation, providing a crucial opportunity for the innovation of dance arts. In this context, dance arts in China began to emerge in the form of dance dramas, blending traditional and modern, Eastern and Western elements. Dancers during this period actively explored, attempting to integrate Western dance concepts with China's cultural traditions, creating a modern dance with distinct Chinese characteristics.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, dance arts received high-level attention from the state. Chinese classical dance, extracted from traditional operas, and folk dances collected from various ethnic regions, became integral components of Chinese dance. Additionally, the introduction of Russian ballet injected new artistic elements into Chinese dance, exemplified by classic works such as 'Swan Lake,' showcasing the diversity of dance. The efforts during this period

not only expanded the creative field of Chinese dance arts but also gradually exposed it to the influence of Western culture. The state's investment in dance education also increased, nurturing a considerable number of professional dance talents.^[1]

During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese dance arts underwent rigorous political scrutiny. Despite facing restrictions in form and content, this period gave rise to some politically charged dance works. These works, to some extent, reflected the social context and political atmosphere of the time.

After the initiation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy, as China's engagement with the world deepened, Chinese dancers became increasingly influenced by modern dance and ballet. This influence manifested not only in dance techniques but, more significantly, in the conceptualization and methods of dance creation. Against this backdrop, Chinese dance theatre gradually took shape, absorbing Western dance elements while inheriting the core of traditional Chinese dance. This fusion has endowed Chinese dance theatre with greater diversity and international characteristics, providing audiences with a novel artistic experience that amalgamates drama, music, and visual arts. Furthermore, Chinese dance theatre has emerged prominently in international dance festivals and competitions, earning widespread acclaim in the global dance community.

In summary, the evolution of Chinese dance theatre represents a process of amalgamating tradition with modernity, East with West. After traversing multiple historical stages of exploration and innovation, it has developed into a unique artistic form with distinct Chinese characteristics. Not only has there been innovation in techniques and forms, but there has also been alignment in artistic concepts and creative methods with the global landscape, offering a rich and vibrant artistic experience for audiences worldwide.^[2]

2. The May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Transformation of Chinese Dance

2.1 The May Fourth Movement and its Cultural Impact

At the beginning of the 20th century, China was undergoing a cultural turning point. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 not only marked a cultural awakening in modern Chinese history but also represented the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. This movement had profound impacts on political and social domains, paving the way for the dissemination of new thoughts and new culture. As described by Zhangtian in his article, the May Fourth Movement served as the prologue to China's New Culture Movement, leaving an indelible mark on the country's revolutionary and cultural processes. Against this backdrop, China was striving to break free from the shackles of imperialism, pursuing national modernization and independence, while also mounting a robust counterattack against internal feudal culture and government corruption.

The May Fourth Movement advocated modern concepts, democratic ideals, and a scientific spirit, paving the way for cultural and literary innovation in China. Mao Zedong, in his theory of New Democracy, further emphasized the decisive role of the May Fourth Movement in China's revolutionary process.

During this period, Chinese society underwent a profound reflection on traditional culture, with numerous intellectuals proposing scientific and democratic concepts and advocating the study and emulation of Western culture. The cultural and intellectual background behind the May Fourth Movement included:

Opposition to Feudal Culture: During the May Fourth Movement, many intellectuals began to reevaluate traditional feudal culture, considering it a primary cause of China's backwardness. They promoted ideas of science, democracy, and progress, opposing feudalism and patriarchal views. This reflection was not confined to academia but resonated widely across various societal strata, leading to a reassessment of traditional values.

Admiration for Western Culture: During the May Fourth Movement, Western science, culture, and

arts were widely disseminated and embraced in China. Many intellectuals started learning from and emulating Western culture, considering it a crucial path towards modernization. Western literature, philosophy, and social science theories were extensively translated and circulated, providing Chinese intellectuals with new tools and perspectives for contemplation.

Furthermore, the May Fourth Movement also propelled thoughts of women's liberation. During this period, women began advocating for equality, education, and career opportunities, challenging traditional gender roles and constraints. The May Fourth Movement was not only a political and cultural awakening but also a social awakening, laying a solid foundation for China's modernization process.^[3]

These cultural and intellectual backgrounds had a profound impact on dance creation and performance. In this context, China's dance scene underwent significant transformations as dancers began to reflect on traditional dance forms and content. They ventured into incorporating Western dance techniques and concepts, aiming to create dance works with contemporary significance. Before the May Fourth Movement, Chinese dance primarily focused on narrative and collective elements, while Western modern dance emphasized individual self-expression and the direct conveyance of emotions. This cultural difference provided Chinese dancers with a new artistic language and creative perspective. Dancers such as Chen Jing and Wu Xiaobang played crucial roles during this period. They not only learned and drew inspiration from Western dance techniques but, more importantly, attempted to integrate Western modern dance concepts with China's traditional dance culture.

For example, Chen Jing's work 'Awakening' combines traditional Chinese elements with Western modern dance techniques, portraying the awakening and struggles of the youth during the May Fourth Movement. Wu Xiaobang's pieces, 'Poppy Flower' and 'Tiger Lord,' are products of this cultural transformation and artistic innovation, showcasing the perfect integration of the traditional charm of Chinese dance with Western dance elements.

In the cultural context of the May Fourth Movement, dance became intricately connected to societal realities. Dancers created numerous works that reflected social issues, criticized feudal culture, and propagated new ideas, turning dance into a significant medium for social change. These works not only showcased the traditional charm of Chinese dance but also incorporated Western dance elements, providing new directions and perspectives for subsequent dance creations.

2.2 Western Dance Influence and Pioneers in 20th-Century China

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the extensive performances of Western ballet, modern dance, and folk dance troupes in China, a unique cultural phenomenon emerged in the history of Chinese dance. These performances had a profound impact on China, leading to the widespread dissemination and acceptance of Western dance culture. Especially in major cities, Western lifestyles were becoming a fashionable pursuit. In 1923, the American Tantomount to Harvard Operatic Troupe performed American musicals at the Victoria Theatre in Shanghai. In 1925, a Japanese troupe performed the musical drama 'Youth at the Age of 20' in Shanghai. From 1925 to 1926, the modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan led her modern dance troupe on a tour in cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai, presenting modern dance and various folk dances from around the world. The repertoire included 'Spanish Dance,' 'Nymphs of the Sea,' 'Javanese Dance,' 'Indian Dance,' as well as Chinese-style dances like 'Guan Yin Dance' and 'Farewell My Concubine.'

This was a troupe representing the pinnacle of Western ballet at that time, and its performances in China had a significant impact. The year 1926 was an extraordinary one for the early 20th-century Chinese stage. Following the appreciation of the modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan's dance troupe and the Moscow State Theatre's ballet performances, the latter part of the same year, November to December, witnessed the arrival of the Moscow Duncan Dance Troupe led by Emma Duncan, a

student of the Western modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan.

The Moscow Duncan Dance Troupe first arrived in Harbin, Northeast China, before performing in cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Their main programs included 'Youth Dance,' 'Joy,' and 'Hide and Seek.' They presented modern dances in the style of Isadora Duncan, known for their avant-garde significance, leaving a profound impact on Chinese audiences. Novelist Yu Dafu, after watching their performance, wrote in his diary, 'Duncan's dance forms all carry revolutionary significance, expressing strength everywhere.' This marked the first evaluation of Western modern dance by Chinese literati in history. Yu Dafu's understanding and judgment of modern dance appear accurate and appropriate even a century later.

In January 1927, the Duncan Dance Troupe performed in Wuhan. Their modern dances such as 'Funeral Song' and 'National Revolution Song' dedicated to commemorate the passing of Mr. Sun Yat-sen, along with 'Long Live the Liberation of Chinese Women' and 'Young Communist International Song,' caused a great sensation.

This series of performances by Western dance troupes had a profound impact on China. From then on, especially in metropolitan areas, the Western lifestyle became a pursuit of fashion for the Chinese. The introduction of Western dance culture, along with the reformist and Westernization proposals in novels, dramas, music, and other fields at that time, was spiritually consistent. While dance might not have seemed at the forefront of clashes between old and new cultures, the humanism and spirit of innovation in Western dance, along with the displayed artistic aesthetic taste, had already begun to enter the lives of the Chinese people.

In the mid-1930s, Wu Xiaobang held a unique position in the modern dance history of China. As the pioneer of Chinese new dance art during this period, he introduced the concept of the 'New Dance Art Movement.' This movement advocated the rejection of traditional constraints, the fusion of Eastern and Western dance elements, and emphasized innovation and experimentation in dance. It sought not only the perfection of technique but also focused on the functional aspect of dance in expressing societal realities and human emotions. The New Dance Art Movement encouraged dancers to delve into life, drawing inspiration for their creations, making dance works more contemporary and socially responsible.

Wu Xiaobang, as a representative figure of this movement, closely tied his artistic pursuits to the zeitgeist. He believed that dance was not just a display of technique but a conveyance of emotion and thought. He advocated for dance to reflect societal realities and convey genuine emotions rather than being a hollow showcase of technical prowess. Consequently, his works often possessed strong social criticism and enlightening significance.

For instance, 'March of the Volunteers' is not merely a song but a symbol of an era. In this piece, Wu Xiaobang seamlessly integrated the heroism of the War of Resistance against Japan and national spirit into the dance, depicting the resilience and indomitability of the Chinese people during the war. Similarly, 'Song of the Guerrilla Fighters' portrays the courageous spirit of guerrilla fighters in the war, sacrificing their lives for the liberation of the nation. These works embody the social criticism and inspirational meaning advocated by Wu Xiaobang.

These works are not merely dance performances but also a reflection of an era. They mirror the patriotic sentiments of the Chinese people during the war, portraying the unity and resilience of a nation facing adversity. Wu Xiaobang's creations injected new vitality into the development of Chinese dance art and provided valuable creative experiences and insights for subsequent dancers.

In the realm of 20th-century dance, Wu Xiaobang is undoubtedly an outstanding representative, but he shares the spotlight with another exceptionally talented dancer - Dai Ailian. Dai Ailian's life and artistic achievements add a unique dimension to the history of Chinese dance.

Born in 1916 on the Caribbean island of Trinidad in the West Indies, Dai Ailian, despite her distant place of birth, carried the bloodline of Xinhui, Guangdong. This dancer with Eastern heritage received

her initial dance education at a white dance school in Trinidad during her early years. This experience laid a solid foundation for her subsequent artistic career.

At the age of 14, Dai Ailian embarked on a journey to England, where she entered the prestigious ballet school led by Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova. This school was acclaimed as a sanctuary for ballet dance, nurturing numerous world-class ballet stars. Here, Dai Ailian not only refined her dance techniques, but more importantly, she became the first dancer in modern Chinese history to receive formal ballet education.

This historic achievement not only signaled further integration of the Chinese dance scene with the international dance community but also paved a new path for subsequent Chinese dancers. Dai Ailian's artistic career undoubtedly added a vibrant chapter to the history of Chinese dance.

In addition to Wu Xiaobang and Dai Ailian, there were many other outstanding dancers in the early 20th century who made significant contributions to the Chinese dance scene during this period. One such figure is Yang Liqing, a pioneer in Chinese modern dance. Her works, such as 'Yellow River' and 'Song of the Earth,' carry profound social significance, portraying the magnificent landscapes of China and the valiant struggles of its people. Another notable dancer is Zhao Lihua, a trailblazer in Chinese ballet. Her piece 'Red Detachment of Women' stands as a classic in Chinese ballet, depicting the heroic struggles of Chinese women during the revolutionary era.

The works of these dancers not only hold deep social meaning but also incorporate elements from Western dance, providing new directions and perspectives for subsequent dance creations. Their contributions had a profound impact on the development of Chinese dance, infusing it with new life and vitality against the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement.

In summary, the May Fourth Movement era holds monumental significance in the development of modern dance in China. Against this unique historical backdrop, Chinese dance underwent unprecedented transformations and innovations. Dancers actively absorbed techniques and concepts from Western dance, merging them with China's traditional dance culture to create a series of dance works that are not only characterized by a Chinese essence but also embody a modern sensibility. These works not only laid a solid foundation for the development of modern dance in China but also provided valuable experiences and insights for subsequent dance creations.

More importantly, the dance innovations during the May Fourth Movement era created favorable conditions for the introduction and development of dance theaters during the later reform and opening-up period. The artistic achievements of this period undoubtedly provided a powerful impetus for the modernization of Chinese dance, securing its presence on the international dance stage.

3. The Impact of Dance Art during the Cultural Revolution Period

3.1 Suppression of Traditional Dance Forms and Politicization

Entering the Cultural Revolution, Chinese dance art faced significant challenges. Traditional dance forms and content were subjected to strict scrutiny and limitations, while dance works aligned with revolutionary ideology were widely promoted. This politicization had profound effects on the artistic and innovative aspects of dance. However, concurrently, this period also gave rise to new dance forms and styles, offering fresh possibilities and directions for the development of Chinese dance art.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a unique period in Chinese history, leaving a profound impact on the country's culture, society, and political life. Dance art was not spared from unprecedented challenges and disruptions. Firstly, traditional dance forms and content faced rigorous scrutiny and restrictions. Many dance works deemed 'feudal,' 'capitalist,' or 'revisionist' were prohibited from being performed.

For instance, some ancient court dances and religious dances, due to their association with feudal or religious culture, were considered 'reactionary' artistic forms and thus were either banned or

significantly modified. This led to the loss or alteration of numerous traditional dances to meet the political requirements of the time. For example, during this period, early socialist dance projects were suppressed, and a new revolutionary ballet took precedence, nearly erasing Chinese dance as an artistic endeavor and historical memory. Many dance techniques and props were prohibited during this period. These dances, originally intended to showcase skill and beauty, were deemed to have feudalistic undertones during the Cultural Revolution and, therefore, faced restrictions. Only those dances deemed in line with revolutionary ideology were allowed to be performed. For instance, the 'Loyalty Dance' and 'Red Army Dance,' created to celebrate the revolution and the Red Army, received extensive promotion and popularity during this period.

Furthermore, the creation and performance of dance art were heavily politicized. Dance ceased to be a mere artistic expression and instead became a tool for political propaganda. During this period, every movement and scene in dance was imbued with profound political significance, demanding performers to convey revolutionary enthusiasm and unwavering loyalty to the Party. The suppression of traditional Chinese dance during this period resulted in the emergence of numerous 'revolutionary dances' and 'model operas.' These works were deeply influenced by Mao Zedong Thought and were used as propaganda tools to promote the values and ideals of the Communist Party. For example, 'The Red Detachment of Women' not only depicted the heroic struggles of female Red Army soldiers but also emphasized the victories they achieved under the Party's leadership. 'The White-Haired Girl,' on the other hand, critiqued feudal exploitation and oppression by portraying the tragic experiences of Yang Bailao, a woman in a mountain village, while also praising the liberation brought about by the Communist Party for the people.

Furthermore, the choreography and performance of these dance works emphasized a spirit of collectivism, with dancers often required to form orderly formations to showcase the strength and unity of the masses. Additionally, the music, costumes, and props for these works were designed to align with revolutionary themes, enhancing their political propaganda impact.

3.2 Innovation and Transformation amid Political Constraints

However, despite the tremendous impact of the Cultural Revolution on dance, this historical period also brought new opportunities for innovation and development in dance art. In order to better reflect the lives and emotions of the masses, many dance works began to explore fusion with other art forms. For instance, the combination of dance and opera allowed dance to incorporate not only pure physical movements but also music and singing, enhancing the expressiveness and emotional depth of the dance. Similarly, the fusion of dance and drama emphasized plot and narrative, requiring dancers not only to demonstrate exquisite dance techniques but also to possess acting skills, presenting the characters' personalities and emotions perfectly.

In addition, the emergence and popularization of film provided a new platform for the presentation of dance art. Many dance works began to explore cinematic filming and production, allowing dance to be conveyed to a wider audience through the big screen. Simultaneously, it brought more possibilities for the creation and performance of dance. This unique 'popular dance' style, although influenced to some extent by politics and ideology, is primarily based on a focus and reflection of the real lives and emotions of the people. This attention and reflection not only made dance art more down-to-earth and closer to the people but also accumulated valuable experience and materials for the future development of dance art.

The transformation of dance education during the Cultural Revolution was particularly drastic. The existing teaching systems and curriculum content underwent strict scrutiny, leading to the suspension of teaching or large-scale reorganization of many dance schools and institutions with rich history and tradition. Ballet dominated the training curriculum for new dancers, and dance films

produced before the Cultural Revolution were subjected to censorship, no longer appearing in the public eye. This sudden upheaval not only affected the students and teachers of that time but also had profound implications for China's dance education system and training models.

Revolutionary ballet became the sole exposure to socialist dance for many children and adolescents. Suddenly, the focus of dance education shifted from cultivating skills and artistic expression to content aligning with revolutionary ideology. This transformation altered the training methods and directions for generations of dance talents. This tumultuous and transformative period had a profound impact on the development of Chinese dance, compelling practitioners to reassess their mission and identity in the post-revolution era.

At the same time, many acclaimed dancers in the dance community suffered significant setbacks during this historical period. Their works, deemed incompatible with the prevailing political ideology, were labeled as 'reactionary' or 'feudal,' leading to various forms of criticism, persecution, and, in some cases, forcing dancers to abandon their beloved dance careers. The ordeals faced by these dancers were not just personal tragedies but also represented a loss for the entire dance community. Their experiences and fates serve as vivid examples of the direct and profound impact of the Cultural Revolution on the dance arts, leaving a profound reflection for future generations.

The relationship between dance and popular culture was unprecedentedly strengthened during the Cultural Revolution. Dance not only served as a crucial tool for political propaganda but also became deeply integrated with popular culture. During this period, a large number of masses not only acted as spectators but also actively participated in the creation and performance of 'rebellion dances' and 'loyalty dances.' This extensive involvement made dance more grounded and closer to the real lives and emotions of the people, demonstrating a seamless connection between dance and popular culture.

Furthermore, the integration of dance with other art forms reached a new height during this period. Dance was no longer an isolated art form but engaged in profound interactions and fusion with other art forms such as music, theater, painting, and more. This interdisciplinary collaboration opened up new pathways for the innovation of dance art, making dance pieces more diverse, vibrant, and expressive.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the dance community welcomed a new spring. Despite the significant challenges and impact on dance art during the Cultural Revolution, dance rapidly revived after its conclusion, showcasing tremendous vitality. Traditional dances that had been prohibited or lost were reevaluated and restored. Additionally, new dance creations emerged abundantly, injecting fresh energy into the future of dance art.

And regarding the dance art during the Cultural Revolution, the dance community engaged in profound introspection. This reflection not only helped the dance community understand and evaluate the dance art of that specific period but also provided valuable experiences and lessons for the future development of dance art. Dancers came to realize that, in any era, dance art should uphold its artistic and independent nature, not being excessively influenced by external factors. This insight holds significant guiding significance for the long-term development of dance art.

These two significant historical periods, especially their impact on dance art, created favorable conditions for the entry of dance theaters into China during the subsequent reform and opening-up era. The dance innovation during the May Fourth Movement and the dance transformation during the Cultural Revolution accumulated valuable experiences for the Chinese dance community. This enabled China, during the reform and opening-up era, to more openly embrace and absorb international dance art forms, particularly the novel art form of dance theater. The achievements in dance art during this period undoubtedly provided powerful impetus for the modernization of Chinese dance, allowing it to secure a place on the international dance stage.

4. The Transformation of Dance Art during the Reform and Opening-Up Period

4.1 Embracing International Influence: Impact of Western Artistic Forms

The era of China's reform and opening-up began in 1978, marking a crucial period in which China gradually opened its economy, society, and cultural sectors, propelling the country towards modernization. During this period, profound transformations and developments occurred in China's artistic community. Reform and opening-up hold a pivotal position in contemporary Chinese history, contributing to significant changes in the social, political, and artistic development environments of the country.

In terms of the social environment, reform and opening-up have guided the vigorous development of China's economy and the urbanization process. This has led to changes in social structure, a gradual reduction in rural-urban disparities, increased population mobility, and growing social mobility, resulting in the gradual formation of social strata. Against this social backdrop, people's lifestyles, values, and aesthetic orientations have undergone significant evolution, displaying a trend towards diversity and openness. In the political environment, reform and opening-up have brought profound adjustments to China's political ideologies.

A development strategy centered on economic construction replaced the previous emphasis on class struggle and collectivist ideologies. The government gradually relaxed control over culture and the arts, abolishing some prior political censorship mechanisms, thereby increasing the freedom of artistic creation.

In terms of the development of arts and culture, reform and opening-up significantly enriched China's cultural and artistic landscape. Artists broke free from past political constraints, exploring diverse and individualistic approaches to creativity. New creative themes encompassed a broader societal spectrum, addressing aspects of humanity, emotions, and daily life, presenting a more intricate and nuanced humanistic perspective.

In the early stages of the reform and opening-up, China's artistic community faced both newfound freedom and challenges. The government encouraged artists to engage in more innovative creations, discarding the previous political constraints on artistic expression. Various fields such as painting, music, film, drama, and dance witnessed the emergence of more diverse and individualistic works. Artists began to draw inspiration from international art trends, engaging with Western contemporary art, thereby broadening the horizons of artistic creation in China. In the realm of visual arts, artists gradually moved away from the previous mode of creating politically motivated propaganda paintings, embarking on explorations of individual emotions and aesthetic expressions.

Some artists attempted to incorporate Western painting styles and techniques, emphasizing authentic depictions of life, society, and human nature. There were also notable changes in the field of music. Traditional musical forms fused with Western musical elements, giving rise to new genres. The emergence of pop music contributed to a shift in the aesthetic sensibilities of China's younger generation, and musical art began to spread widely among the public.

The film industry also underwent a flourishing development. Chinese cinema broke free from the constraints of past propaganda themes and began to shoot more realistic and diverse subjects. This period saw the emergence of many outstanding films that gained recognition both domestically and internationally. Progress in drama and dance was also significant. Stage arts diversified, featuring not only traditional performances but also more modern and innovative works. During the reform and opening-up period, China introduced Western forms of drama and dance, fostering international exchange in Chinese drama and dance.

4.2 From Imitation to Innovation: Shaping Chinese Dance in a Global Context

During this period, Chinese dancers extensively studied and drew inspiration from Western dance techniques and expressive methods, aligning Chinese dance with international standards. Simultaneously, with the societal opening-up, there was a continuous increase in people's demand for and appreciation of the arts, creating favorable conditions for the development of dance theaters.

The reform and opening-up not only introduced Western artistic forms, enriching Chinese artists' creative techniques and artistic expressions but also facilitated the dissemination of Western artistic ideologies in China. This dissemination liberated and enlightened the artists' thinking, broadening their creative perspectives. Riding this wave, a group of dance artists embarked on a journey of 'learning from the West to enrich the East.' They actively sought to understand Western cultural and artistic styles and philosophical ideas, integrating Western academic thoughts into localized artistic creations, giving birth to new expressions within the specific cultural context of China.

During this period, dance creators actively challenged traditional choreographic models, dance genres, and movement vocabulary. There was a heightened emphasis on the essence of dance and exploration of real-life themes. They began creating more authentic and emotionally resonant works, such as 'Hope,' 'Wedding on the Execution Ground,' and 'Farewell, Mother.' These works showcased a dance style that refreshed people's perceptions. Simultaneously, the Western concept of 'dance theater' gained widespread dissemination and acceptance in China, providing dance artists with a new and non-traditional platform for artistic expression.

Against the backdrop of reform and opening up, people began to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of 'dance theater,' and this artistic form gradually integrated into China's dance creation. Inspired by Western dance art trends, Chinese dance artists began to embrace and learn foreign artistic forms more openly, eager to innovate in their personal artistic expression.

Many dance pioneers have actively explored new creative approaches, such as 'dance theater,' a novel artistic concept that has garnered widespread attention and practice in China. Choreographers and performers have ventured into Western dance creation methods, aiming to break free from traditional constraints and produce more innovative and profound works. On the basis of reflecting on traditional Chinese dance, they gradually shifted the direction of their creations. Instead of primarily serving political and traditional Chinese dance requirements, the focus turned towards creations that emphasized emotional expression and authenticity. Influenced by Western contemporary dance, China's dance creation methods also underwent profound changes.

4.3 From Imitation to Innovation: Shaping Chinese Dance in a Global Context

The Western artistic form of 'Dance Theatre' finds fertile ground to take root and sprout in the vast expanse of China. The personal pursuit of artistic innovation by Chinese dance creators and performers, coupled with the increasing impulse to break through traditional dance forms with the opening of society, has led to continuous and innovative practical creations. This has resulted in innovative expressions of dance art forms. Many professional dance practitioners began to experiment with the creative methods of 'Dance Theatre' and incorporated elements of Chinese traditional culture and art, creating 'Dance Theatre' works with distinct Chinese characteristics. This laid the foundation for the rapid spread of the 'Dance Theatre' form in China and achieved significant breakthroughs. The performance forms and content brought by 'Dance Theatre' allowed Chinese dancers to see that dance could undergo innovation and evolution in many aspects, propelling the Chinese dance industry into a new stage of development.

The reform and opening-up not only promoted the creation of Chinese indigenous dance art but also influenced Chinese art scholars to engage in more extensive research on Western artistic trends. Simultaneously, Chinese dance scholars have gradually begun to flourish in theoretical research on

Western dance art. After the publication of the first book in China introducing the history of world dance, 'World Dance,' translated by Guo Mingda and compiled by German dancer Kurt Jooss, more works on Western dance studies have been published. Examples include Zhu Liren's 'Outline of Western Ballet History,' Ou Jianping's 'History and Appreciation of Foreign Dances,' Liu Qingyi's 'Outline of Western Modern Dance History,' and various papers published in dance journals, all introducing Western dance thoughts. These studies on Western artistic trends and theories form the theoretical foundation for the localization understanding of 'dance theater.' Subsequently, some scholars explored the inherent characteristics of 'dance theater' from a theoretical perspective, summarizing and elaborating on their understanding of the core concepts of 'dance theater.'

Furthermore, the reform and opening-up of Chinese society provided many artists with opportunities to travel abroad for academic exchanges. Western dance troupes found it more convenient to come to China for performances, further promoting the exchange of Eastern and Western dance arts. This expansion broadened the horizons of the dance community and audiences in China, introducing a variety of dance styles. Numerous outstanding foreign dance art groups visited China for performances, not only exposing Chinese dancers to new perspectives but also injecting a fresh concept and creative vitality of international theatrical arts into the Chinese cultural landscape.

Whether it's the ballet drama 'Spartacus' from the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, 'Anna' from the Saint Petersburg Eifman Ballet, the ballet 'Mayerling' from the UK, or 'The Taming of the Shrew' from Stuttgart, these immensely impactful classic works ignite a blazing flame within the hearts of Chinese dancers. So, Chinese dancers, first surprised, then learning and contemplating, embarked on a process of breaking through rigid patterns to seek new artistic paths.

During this period, for a while, some dancers indulged in simply imitating and copying the movement techniques of foreign dances, especially modern dance, which was criticized by the renowned dancer Jia Zuoguang as 'everyone crawling around, not knowing what it's for?!' In the mid-1990s, contemporary Chinese dancers gradually emerged from the trap of pure imitation, starting to seek the Chinese personality in dance. When Wang Mei's work 'We See the Riverbank' was introduced and when the Guangdong Modern Dance Company received enthusiastic acclaim during their visit to the United States, we suddenly realized: only by finding our own artistic path can we truly gain recognition from the world!

More and more dance artists have witnessed this unprecedented, novel, and unique artistic expression and creative concept in the Chinese dance community. Many choreographers and dancers, influenced by these artistic trends, theoretical research, and performances, have gradually entered the ranks of 'dance theater' creation. Through their own practices, they have made more people aware of the charm and characteristics of this emerging art form, igniting a wave of 'dance theater' creation with Chinese themes, emotions, and content at its core.

In summary, the evolution of Chinese dance theater has gradually taken shape within specific historical and cultural contexts. From New Art to modern dance, and then to localized innovations, each period has infused new vitality and development directions into Chinese dance. The reform and opening-up era provided Chinese dance artists with the opportunity to connect with the international community, not only drawing inspiration from Western artistic forms but also constructing a dance creation with distinctive Chinese characteristics. The evolution of Chinese dance art began with breaking free from rigid dance ideologies, departing from the formalized styles of traditional dance language. Boldly drawing inspiration from foreign dance cultures in both concepts and choreographic methods, Chinese dance underwent a process of self-renewal and improvement, striving to explore new dimensions in dance creation. During this period, Chinese dance art, with its immense charm, extensively absorbed advanced concepts and scientific methods from world dance education. This attracted a large number of talented and young dancers who immersed themselves in the torrent of historical development, unleashing unprecedented artistic vibrancy. This process not only influenced

dance forms but also opened up mental constraints, bringing forth possibilities for innovation.

5. Conclusions

The emergence of the dance theater in 20th-century China unfolded through the influences and challenges posed by three pivotal historical periods: the May Fourth Movement, the Cultural Revolution, and the Reform and Opening-up era. This transformative journey not only signifies profound changes in Chinese dance art but also reflects the turbulence and evolution of Chinese society, politics, and culture.

The May Fourth Movement, a cultural upheaval in early 20th-century China, provided a significant opportunity for innovation and development in dance. During this period, dance artists sought to break free from traditional constraints, emphasizing individuality and innovative expression. This laid the foundation for the later rise of dance theater, transforming dance from a traditional cultural expression tool into a more individualistic and creative art form.

However, the impact of the Cultural Revolution on dance art was overwhelmingly negative. Dance art faced significant upheaval due to political movements, with traditional dances being criticized as feudal superstitions, and dance creators grappling with substantial artistic challenges. This period of turmoil had a long-lasting detrimental effect on Chinese dance, leading to the prohibition of many traditional dance pieces and a stagnation of dance art.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese dance art entered a new era. The Reform and Opening-up policies brought monumental changes to Chinese society, positively influencing dance art. Traditional dances were reevaluated and restored, and a plethora of new dance works emerged. The Reform and Opening-up era provided favorable conditions for the development of dance theater, aligning Chinese dance with the international stage.

Considering the transformations during these three periods, a conclusion can be drawn: the rise of dance theater in 20th-century China is a historical process with continuous developments. The May Fourth Movement injected new thoughts and concepts into dance, the tumultuous Cultural Revolution plunged dance into a trough, and the Reform and Opening-up era offered opportunities for revival and innovation. These three periods interwovenly constitute the developmental trajectory of Chinese dance theater.

Today, Chinese dance theater stands as a vibrant and creative domain, attracting numerous outstanding dance creators and performers. This historical process not only witnesses the fluctuations of Chinese dance art but also provides valuable experience for future development. The rise of Chinese dance theater is a response to tradition and an integration of international trends, injecting new connotations into Chinese dance, and actively contributing to the global presentation of Chinese culture on the stage.

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