

# *The Cross-Boundary Development of Ethnic Folk Dance as Seen through Yunnan's Senior Fitness Dance Competition*

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the cross-genre fusion trend in dance, the integration of diverse dance forms—reflecting the spirit of innovation and creativity—has manifested not only in professional stage arts but also permeated popular dance culture. The integration of sports dance with ethnic folk dance, square dance with ethnic folk dance, and other dance genres reflects the diverse developmental trends in contemporary dance. For instance, the 2024 Yunnan Provincial Senior Fitness Dance Competition hosted by Lincang City, Yunnan Province, exemplifies the multifaceted evolution of mass dance culture from another perspective. This initiative enriches the cultural lives of citizens and contributes to the preservation of ethnic cultural heritage.

## **1. Square Dancing and Ethnic Folk Dance**

### **1.1 Overview of Square Dancing**

Square dancing, as the name suggests, is a form of dance performed in public squares. As opposed to professional stage arts, it is a product of mass dance culture. It refers to group activities conducted in public spaces, primarily for fitness and entertainment purposes, where participants perform choreographed dance routines to music using either bare hands or light equipment. The term "mass dance" here denotes contemporary dance activities centered around the general public, with self-entertainment as their main objective. Currently, such dances in China primarily manifest as rural folk dances, urban community dances, and campus dances, with the most representative being the widely popular square dance.

Square dance is a dance performed by the masses. Beloved for its simplicity and accessibility, it offers both fitness and entertainment. From a functional perspective, square dance can be categorized as a fitness-recreational dance form—a dance style that achieves entertainment through movement. Square dance typically integrates fitness and self-entertainment functions, embedding physical exercise within recreational activities to achieve both mental well-being and physical health. It not only showcases the talents of dancers but also reflects the lives and emotions of the masses through movement.

## 1.2 Overview of Ethnic Folk Dance

Ethnic folk dance encompasses concepts under different classification systems. As the name suggests, ethnic dance refers to dances unique to a specific ethnic group. Meanwhile, the term "folk" in dance typically encompasses two distinct designations: "folk dance" and "folk dance art." Folk dance can be considered a dance genre, while folk dance art represents a form of dance. Professor Luo Xiongyan posits that folk dance represents "the artistic elevation of folk dance from its grassroots origins to the stage—a process of artistic re-creation from the rudimentary to the sophisticated. When certain folk dances undergo refinement and adaptation for theatrical presentation, they become independent stage art forms. These differ in nature from folk dance and should be termed folk dance programs." This perspective acknowledges their distinction, suggesting that any performance staged on a theater platform ceases to be folk dance but may be designated as "folk dance." However, with societal evolution, the concept of "stage" has broadened significantly, making stage adaptation an increasingly ambiguous criterion for distinction. Notably, ethnic dance does not necessarily equate to folk dance. For instance, the Dai and Mongolian ethnic groups in China incorporate court dances, which represent a distinct and contrasting dance form to folk dance. The term "ethnic folk dance" as used today refers specifically to the dances of China's ethnic minorities and the folk dances of the Han Chinese, encompassing both academically trained stage creations and traditional folk expressions.

## 1.3 The Correlation between the Two

At their core, square dancing and ethnic folk dances share highly overlapping cultural roots. Both largely originated from the daily lives and labor of ordinary people, emerging as spontaneous forms of physical expression during work breaks or festive rituals[2]. They embody the folk customs and practical wisdom of their respective regions. In terms of classification, folk dance is inherently a primal form of square dance, with a significant portion falling under the broad category of "mass dance." However, the conceptual boundaries between the two are not entirely blurred; clear distinctions exist.

Within the defined concept of "mass dance," traditional folk dances in their original, unaltered forms are not included. Those dances that remain unprocessed, are more appropriately classified under the independent category of ethnic folk dance. In contrast, dance forms that draw inspiration from traditional folk dances but undergo artistic adaptation and transformation, primarily aiming to entertain, relax the mind, and promote physical fitness, are explicitly included within the scope of "mass dance." This distinction considers both the cultural essence of the dance and its contemporary functional attributes.

The traditional folk dance "Guozhuang" from Yunnan serves as a clear illustration of this conceptual logic. The original form of traditional Guozhuang dance is often closely tied to festivals, ceremonies, and rituals for worship and blessings. Its choreography embodies reverence for nature and remembrance of ancestors, while its rhythmic steps and lyrical content carry profound ethnic history and cultural memory. Therefore, it is more appropriately classified as an ethnic folk dance rather than ordinary "mass dance."

In contrast, the adapted, entertainment-oriented "Guozhuang" fully aligns with the definition of "mass dance." This modified form distills the simple, easy-to-learn core steps from traditional Guozhuang while discarding complex ritual sequences and religious symbolism. Within the narrower concept of square dancing, it has evolved into a dance form practiced by middle-aged and elderly groups in public spaces like squares and parks for physical fitness and social recreation. With its light, nimble movements and lively rhythms, it preserves the ethnic flavor of traditional Guozhuang while meeting the fitness and entertainment needs of the masses. Consequently, it is

explicitly classified within the category of "mass dance."

## **2. The Integration of Square Dance and Ethnic Folk Dance**

### **2.1 Creating Works Through the Lens of Routine: The Case of "The Sky is Blue"**

The standardized routines for square dancing refer to those approved and released by the General Administration of Sport of China and the Ministry of Culture, as well as those endorsed by the Square Dance Special Committee of the Chinese Senior Citizens' Sports Association. Both the music and movements are prescribed, though formations may be freely arranged. Scoring primarily evaluates the teams' expressiveness and artistic merit. For instance, in this competition, multiple teams selected "Blue Sky" performed by Phoenix Legend. Musically, this song features a lively rhythm with pronounced pauses, making it well-suited for choreographing senior dance movements and formation transitions. In terms of choreography, despite being prescribed movements, "Blue Sky" offers high adaptability. It seamlessly integrates elements from multiple ethnic groups—such as the simple wrist-pressing motions of Mongolian dance and the hook-kick lateral steps of Dai ethnic dance—without clashing with the musical rhythm. This demonstrates the choreographer's thoughtful integration of ethnic dance elements.

Regarding square dance choreography within prescribed routines, I believe the creative leeway afforded to competing teams is limited. Compared to free-style choreography events, the core competitiveness of such competitions lies not in innovative movement design, but rather in formation arrangements and the level of teamwork and coordination among members. The movement patterns for the prescribed routines are predetermined and standardized. Whether it's basic step transitions or the amplitude of arm movements, there are clear standards and requirements. Teams cannot arbitrarily alter the framework of the movements; they can only refine and present the details within the established parameters.

In senior square dance competitions, incorporating compulsory routine events holds multiple practical significances and values. From a competitive perspective, the existence of compulsory routines ensures standardization and fairness through simple, prescribed movements. This eliminates stage imbalance caused by differences in choreographic skills, allowing every team to compete on a relatively level playing field. From a fitness perspective, the uniform and straightforward movement design aligns with the physical capabilities of seniors. Moderate difficulty and controllable intensity prevent excessive strain on the body, providing adequate exercise to loosen muscles and promote blood circulation. Simultaneously, participants derive joy from moving to the rhythm, truly achieving the leisure fitness goal of "dancing with delight." From a team-building perspective, the structured routine training requires every member to maintain consistent steps and synchronized movements. This demands repeated coordination and mutual cooperation among team members. Through daily rehearsals, communication gradually increases, and mutual trust continuously strengthens. This significantly enhances group cohesion, transforming square dancing from merely an exercise into a vital bond that enriches seniors' spiritual lives and deepens friendships.

### **2.2 Non-Formulaic Approaches to Creative Works: The Case of "Ashimu Guava"**

The self-choreographed routines in square dancing refer to dances created or adapted by dance teams themselves. In this competition, many routines were adapted from ethnic folk dances, with the most notable example being "Ashimu Guava" performed by the Diqing Prefecture team. In my view, its first-place win stems from the piece's striking embodiment of the "primitive authenticity" characteristic of Lisu dance, possessing immense emotional impact. Its movements primarily mimic

the dynamics of goats, This dance is a communal, self-entertaining folk dance performed by villagers during festive celebrations, also carrying ritualistic significance. Thus, so-called "primitive" dances likely originated from ancient ancestors who, when song alone proved insufficient, expressed themselves through hand gestures and footwork. These folk dances, largely untouched by modern influences, represent the cultural roots of traditional expression—a key reason for the captivating power of "Ashimu Guagua."

It is generally believed that authentic folk dance belongs to public squares rather than theaters, is self-entertaining rather than performative, participatory rather than spectator-oriented, spontaneous rather than standardized, effortless rather than contrived, and passed down through tradition rather than newly choreographed. Authentic folk dance is a form of folk dance transmitted by ordinary people during folk rituals or activities, and "Ashimu Guagua" is precisely such a dance form. Analyzing "Ashimu Guagua" through the lenses of ethnology, folklore studies, and ethnic and cultural psychology reveals the following spiritual and cultural dimensions: - The symbolic role of totems as carriers of belief; - The central theme of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature; - Its populist nature, rooted in the rhythms of everyday folk life.

First, the totem serves as the emblem and symbol of primitive clans and tribal groups. As the foundational layer forming the deep-seated structure of a nation's cultural psyche, totemic culture embodies the primordial significance of being the source of national culture, the wellspring of the national soul, and the authentic origin of human nature. Primitive dance expresses totem worship or incorporates animal movements—symbolized as totems—into its choreography. This grants the dance a distinctive identity, fostering collective recognition and fulfilling the need for social cohesion and belonging. In Ashimugua, the goat serves as the revered totem. The dance mimics the fighting and head-butting actions of goats, representing a crucial element within primitive dance traditions.

Secondly, it embodies the theme of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The Ashimu Gua dance is essentially a mimetic animal dance, primarily imitating the daily movements of goats. Both humans and animals are part of nature, and this dance serves as a vivid embodiment of this symbiotic relationship. The dancers tread with steady steps, replicating the postures of goats foraging, scaling rocks, and frolicking. Their every gesture and movement lacks artificial artifice, instead radiating reverence for living creatures and submission to nature. The rustling of wind through wild grasses and the leisurely migration of goat herds are transformed into each movement of the dance, eloquently narrating the survival wisdom of the ancient Lisu people—living amidst the mountains and coexisting with all creatures. The dancers' attire also draws heavily from nature. Sheepskin coats and woolen sashes blend seamlessly with the mountain landscape, further reinforcing the visual expression of "man merging with nature." Achimu Gua is not merely a physical rhythm; it is a cultural code engraved with ecological philosophy, reminding future generations that humans and nature are inextricably intertwined. Only through harmonious coexistence can life endure and flourish.

Furthermore, it embodies a popular appeal rooted in folk life. As an organic expression of human activity, folk dance exists among the masses, forming an integral part of their daily lives and productive pursuits. It is a folk dance art form grounded in folk traditions and oriented toward popular aesthetic sensibilities. Production activities represent humanity's most fundamental endeavors. Taking physical exertion as its primary form of expression, primal dance reflects labor practices. In "Ashimu Guagua," movements resembling sowing can be observed, with men and women collaborating to perform agricultural tasks—a vivid embodiment of the daily labor life of the Lisu people.

### **3. An Analysis of the Development Paths of Ethnic and Folk Dance and Square Dance from the Perspective of Cross-border Integration**

#### **3.1 The shift from recreational activities for the masses to professional competitions**

With the advancement of the times and the recent proposal of the "Two Creativities" spirit, the dance community has embraced a wave of cross-disciplinary integration in response to the national call for innovation and creativity. Square dancing, originally a form of fitness and entertainment, has gradually made its way onto the stage of professional competitions. First, folk and ethnic dances originated from human labor and daily life. They are mass dance activities created and performed by the people themselves, expressing the cultural traditions, living customs, and spiritual character of a nation or region. In terms of content, both ethnic folk dance and square dance are diverse. From traditional theatrical forms to contemporary square dance, both represent self-created, self-performed mass dances originating from the people, each constituting an important component of Chinese dance culture. As square dance enters professional competition arenas, its integration with ethnic folk dance becomes inevitable, as both forms emerge from the masses. At this juncture, the "trend" of cross-disciplinary integration has also spread from professional schools and theaters to the grassroots, moving from dance professionals into the general public[3]. Furthermore, the shift from self-entertainment by the masses to professional competition not only reflects how dance as an art form has gradually moved from niche to mainstream, but also demonstrates that the integration of ethnic folk dance and square dance is actually contributing to the development of China's traditional dance culture.

#### **3.2 New Pathways for Traditional Dance Development amidst Transformative Changes**

When the self-entertaining dances performed by various ethnic minorities during folk festivals transitioned from grassroots celebrations to professional competition stages through the medium of square dancing, and as diverse and distinctive elements of ethnic folk dances were integrated into square dancing, it infused the latter with fresh vitality. Moreover, While innovating traditional folk dance movements, square dancing preserves the original styles. It not only retains the stylistic characteristics of various ethnic dances but has also evolved from the earliest bare-handed twisting Yangko dances to performances utilizing props like fans, long silk ribbons, lanterns, bouquets, and other props. This enhances dynamic beauty, amplifies expressive power, and resonates with the aesthetic preferences of China's middle-aged and elderly population. It broadens the age range for learning folk dance while forging new pathways for traditional dance culture and ethnic minority dance traditions.[1] Subsequent analysis of the recent square dance competition for middle-aged and elderly participants reveals that ethnic cultural elements have not only been preserved and developed to a significant degree but have also enriched and diversified the content of square dancing. These two aspects complement each other, achieving mutual enhancement.

In summary, amid the current wave of cross-genre integration sweeping the arts and culture sphere, the fusion of ethnic folk dance with square dance represents a highly valuable practical exploration. This convergence not only infuses square dance with profound cultural depth but also forges entirely new pathways for the inheritance and development of ethnic folk dance, further propelling the promotion of China's outstanding traditional dance culture[5]. On the stage of this square dance competition for middle-aged and elderly participants, I deeply felt the unique charm unleashed by this fusion. Particularly striking were those dance pieces with a strong sense of authenticity, which stood out distinctly from others and achieved a leap in emotional impact. These pieces eschewed ostentatious displays of technique and excessive stage embellishments, instead seamlessly blending the most authentic rhythms and unadorned emotions of ethnic folk dance with

the mass appeal and accessibility of square dance. Every movement of the dancers radiates a deep affection for their homeland and a passionate embrace of life. Their gestures exude the unique charm of ethnic culture, transporting the audience to the vast expanse of folk traditions and immersing them in the vibrant vitality of traditional dance.

It is evident that in subsequent fusion choreography efforts, directors must steadfastly adhere to the creative principle of "rooting in tradition." "Seeking roots" should serve as the foundational core for integrating folk dance with square dance. These "roots" represent the cultural DNA deeply embedded within the people, the dance vocabulary refined through centuries of evolution, and the folk traditions that carry the collective memory of the nation[4]. Choreographers should dedicate themselves to immersive field research, venturing into rural landscapes and village lanes to capture unpolished, authentic dance movements and to listen to the historical narratives and humanistic sentiments behind them. This approach transcends superficial imitation and fragmented collage of ethnic folk dance. Simultaneously, they must fully consider the characteristics of square dance audiences. While preserving the essence of traditional dance, they should reasonably adjust the difficulty of movements to enhance accessibility and adaptability. This allows more middle-aged and elderly people to experience the charm of traditional culture through dance, truly achieving the living transmission of ethnic folk dance. Through this fusion, both dance forms will blossom with a more enduring and brilliant radiance.

#### 4. Conclusions

The Yunnan Senior Square Dance Competition serves as a vivid example of the cross-cultural evolution of ethnic folk dances. During the competition, the crisp rhythmic beats of the Yi ethnic group's tobacco box dance, the graceful movements of the Dai ethnic group's peacock dance, and the simple yet rhythmic Hani ethnic group's palm fan dance were all integrated into the choreography of square fitness dances. This approach preserves the core rhythms and cultural symbols of ethnic dances while simplifying complex techniques to suit the physical capabilities and exercise needs of the elderly. This crossover transcends mere stylistic grafting. By leveraging fitness as an entry point, it liberates ethnic folk dances—once confined to stages and villages—into urban community spaces, transforming them into vehicles for seniors' daily exercise and social engagement. It not only revitalizes contemporary dissemination pathways for ethnic folk dances but also achieves mutual empowerment between cultural heritage and national fitness. This provides a practical model for the modern transformation of traditional dance, showcasing the robust vitality and adaptability of ethnic culture in the new era.

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