

Exploring the Expressive Characteristics of Uyghur Dance through the Framework of “Form, Spirit, Dynamics, and Rhythm”

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Abstract: Due to the variations in geographical environment and folk culture, different ethnic minority dances have evolved over time into their own specific artistic forms. It is one of them that Uyghur dance, which has its roots in the Western Regions and combines oasis labor, folk gatherings, and local aesthetics in its dance art, can be easily separated as a different ethnic minority dance in both physical actions and internal expression. Form, spirit, dynamics, and rhythm, are also the special movement aesthetics, technical principles, and concepts that are present in the performance of ethnic folk dances. This paper uses Uyghur dance as the research topic and discusses its expressive qualities in four aspects, including the external body posture and shaping, inner spiritual resonance, degrees of movement exertion, and characteristic rhythmic patterns. With the help of case studies of popular dance repertoires, including Sanam, Dolan, and Plate Dance, it will examine systematically the manifestation of the four mentioned aesthetic elements in the Uyghur dance performance with the aim of revealing the regional culture and national spirit inherent in the dance. Moreover, the conclusions made in this paper are hoped to serve as theoretical references in teaching classes and choreographing performances of Uyghur dance.

1. Introduction

China has various ethnic minorities with geographical situations, lifestyles, and cultural backgrounds, which have led to the creation of specific types of dance art. To them belongs the Uyghur folk dance that was developed in the unique cultural setting of the Silk Road in the Western Regions, featuring the local oasis lifestyle, folk traditions, and distinctive aesthetics. In both posture and temperament and movement rhythm, it is quite different than the other minority dances, as a minority dance form with high stylistic recognizability and significant cultural depth in China ^[3]. “Form, spirit, dynamics, and rhythm” have always been the fundamental aspects of the aesthetic of Chinese classical dance’s body rhythm, but they are also the bodily expression and the sphere of performance which the dancers aim at in relation to the studies of Chinese ethnic and folk dances. In this paper, Uyghur dance will be analyzed based on the four views mentioned above, along with exemplary cases, to demonstrate the artistic performance attributes of Uyghur dance.

2. “Form”: The Visual Manifestation of Uyghur Dance

The term form implies the fundamental external physical structure to which Chinese minority dances are linked, whereby the observation of the dancer in their static pose and movement in continuity needs to be made. Physical appearance is the main external factor that determines the stylistic character of the dance in the context of Uyghur dance. Body shapes, lines, and movement in the Uyghur dance all have their particular demands and standards that depict and re-enact the cultural atmosphere of the Western Regions very vividly, therefore forming a unique visual identity of this ethnic dance ^[1].

2.1 Body Postures in Uyghur Dance

As it has been long immersed in the environment of the Western Regions, and heavily shaped by the cultural formation and development due to the initial Silk Road, Uyghur folk dance over time acquired a very recognizable way of physical expression in the context of multicultural integration ^[3]. The most notable and noticeable aspect is the steady and uplifted stance: as a standing person, the dancer does not allow his or her lower back and shoulders to bend and close and instead allows them to stand erect and open, whereas the neck is relatively relaxed and supple, forming an aesthetically pleasing neck-lifting line of the body. Moreover, during the whole performance, the knees are slightly trembling to ensure that the body does not become stiff. At the same time, hand movements are part of the necessary expressive components of Uyghur dance; using diverse and nimble hand motions, the body is directed into soft and sinuous lines. The standard lateral shift of the neck, along with the lateral hip-swaying body movement, also separates it out as a distinct physical characteristic, which differs it from other minority dances that usually prefer vertical limb extension, hence giving it its own unique physical features ^[1].

In recent times, Uyghur dance has evolved to include a wide range of genres, each with its own set of norms and attributes regarding the presentation of posture. To illustrate, Sainaimu (Sanam), which is characterized by light and quick motion features, can completely demonstrate the graceful and flexible nature of the body ^[8], Duolang dance is performed in a controlled, weighty artistic manner, with the upper body usually kept in a respectable and composed position, and the center of gravity transferred to the hips to give an impression of a primitive and powerful feeling of strength ^[5], Plate dance places emphasis on the arm-lifting and shoulder-opening form of physical expression, and all the sets of movements are neat, crisp, and dignified. Altogether, even though the various genres of dance may have different appearances, they all appreciate smooth transformations between active and passive poses and consistent alterations in the line of the body. The implication of this is that in the Uyghur dance system, the element of Form is not just an outwardly physical feature, but a significant medium through which dancers can express their internal emotions ^[2].

2.2 Coherence of Dance Movements

The Uyghur dance focuses more on the correlation and transition of movements. The limbs gently move towards the static, energy-accumulating stage and then the expansive dynamic stage, and then revert to the stationary state again - the whole sequence takes place in one continuous flow with a large amount of layering. The knee tremor is the underlying rhythm of this dance style, which passes across every footstep, either in the shuffling step, pointing step, sliding-charging step, or stamping step, all connected by this rhythmic pulse ^[8]. According to the wrist-circling motion, the hand movements go cyclically with the endless dance phrases; a great visual effect is created due to the contrast between movement and stillness when it comes to the sudden freeze into a pose.

Remarkably, Uyghur dance places much emphasis on the high coordination of hands, eyes, body,

and steps; e.g., the movement of the neck and shifting of the waist are to be coordinated, and the turning of the wrist is to reflect the rhythm of the footfall. The flow and connection of every limb should also be natural and smooth. Based on the training principles in Chinese opera of "body rhythm", Uyghur dance is also highly concerned about the unity of the two energies of the physical and the rhythm, whereby all the movements flow down like a waterfall to express in full the warm, unrestrained, nimble, and unique character and spirit of the Western Regions ethnic groups^[3].

2.3 The Embodiment of “Form” in Uyghur Dance—A Case Study of Picking Grapes

One of the many Uyghur dance pieces, the well-known work Picking Grapes is very representative. On the basis of the creative image of harvesting labor in the oasis, the performer remains in the basic position of head raised, waist upright, shoulders opened, neck naturally relaxed and raised, with constant and slight shaking of the knees, which gives the entire dance a gentle yet stable character. The show makes frequent use of the gestures of the hands, like cheek-resting, wrist-circling, and palm-spreading, to simulate the working actions of the act of reaching out to and inspecting fruits, with fluid and flowing movement of the body. Instead of using big vertical undulations, this piece mainly uses side-to-side neck-shifting and hip-swaying combined with twisting of the waist to produce a lively visual impression, which is significantly different compared to other ethnic dances that tend to use mostly vertical motions. The whole piece is in the Sai Nem style, in a rather relaxed and light posture, full of the ambience of folk life. All the movements performed by the dancer are based on the tremor of the knee, combined with the pointing and sliding-charging steps, and after the continuous wrist-circling, sudden freezes happen often, and a sharp contrast is created between motion and immobility. During the performance, hands, eyes, body, and footsteps are synchronized in harmony, and the smooth natural transitions are not interrupted by sudden stops. In addition to presenting the unique regional culture of the Western Regions oases, Picking Grapes also vividly conveys the simplicity and warmth of the Uyghur people through standardized and unified postures, rich body movements, and dynamic and static performance modes alternating, thereby highlighting the fact that the external physical form is an unavoidable condition of expressing style and emotion in Uyghur dance^[4].

3. “Spirit”: The Embodiment of the Soul of Uyghur Dance

When people talk about the aesthetics of ethnic minority dances, they often use the concept of Spirit to indicate the internal vigor and ethic of the dance. This is founded on the customs, beliefs, and character of the ethnic group that has been long built up, which forms the essence of the Uyghur dance as an art form and is the most significant spiritual feature that sets it apart from other ethnic dances^[6]. Inner vitality and expressive demeanor are the life force of Uyghur dance. The absence of such a deep inner spirit means that there are only empty movements and stiff postures, and the emotion of the dance and its soul are gone.

3.1 Ethnic Customs and Religious Beliefs behind the Dance

The emergence of the inner vitality and expressive posture of Uyghur dance is tightly associated with the oasis farming culture of the Western Regions, the folk practices of Meshrep and the native Islamic tradition^[6]. Since one of the mass song-and-dance performances of the Uyghur nation, Meshrep is played on the occasion of festivals, weddings, and other festive assemblies and is common in most parts of Xinjiang in a mostly unified form^[2]. The indigenous cultures of the Western Regions were a strong factor in the origin and evolution of Meshrep, which also had some Islamic cultural components. This dance form has a natural quality that shows the optimism,

open-mindedness, and hospitality of the Uyghur people, much as their personality is not overtly ostentatious or too shy; its steps are modest and graceful, and always respectful and gentle. The creation of this aesthetic idea cannot be separated from the cultivation and the impact of Islamic culture ^[6].

Moreover, Uyghur dance is very good at incorporating life scenes into a theatrical performance—all activities, including picking grapes, spinning by hand, and driving carts, are converted into dynamic and natural movements of the body. The simple beauty of work and the festivity of harvest can be felt in the dancers' posture and facial expression. In general, the specific regional environment, centuries-old productive customs, and special ethnic aesthetic ideas have interwoven with each other throughout the years and together have nurtured the deep inner spiritual ground of Uyghur dance and slowly created its fascinating artistic appeal.

3.2 The Concrete Manifestation of Uyghur Dance's Inner Vitality

The explanation why Uyghur dance is capable of converting the abstract ethnic feelings into some kind of perceptible performance that makes it possible to perceive the inner vitality in an intuitive form is the fact that the main carrier of the dance spirit is the eyes. When dancing, the dancers should have lively and expressive eyes, with lateral neck movements to achieve a glancing, fluid look. Feelings like shyness, warmth, and lightness are shown completely by the eyebrow expressions and the eyes expressions ^[6]. Meanwhile, warm and relaxed smiles also fit in with the simple and pure spiritual disposition of the Western Regions residents.

Additionally, due to the fact that dancers may completely incorporate their true feelings and emotions within a physical act and express them with direct dance forms, Uyghur dance has evolved a unique form of expressing emotions. Uyghur dancers utilize different hand movements to recreate and portray images of real-life work of harvesters in the fields, and when they are in joyous and happy moods, they depend on brisk steps and light postures to depict a relaxed mental condition. The dancers are able to express an array of intricate and subtle inner feelings with their own facial expressions and body language, which would initially be abstract characteristics within human consciousness, but become live-on-stage representations as a result of a natural combination of inner conceptualization and outer presentation of the dance ^[5].

3.3 Expression of “Spirit” in Uyghur dance-A case study of group dance performance Meshrep

Group dance Meshrep represents the unique intrinsic vitality of Uyghur dance in a bright and comprehensive manner. The dance revives true images of the folk assembly with singing and dancing that completely expresses the genial, hospitable, open-minded, and optimistic spiritual attributes of the Uyghur people through expressive gestures and behavior ^[2]. And in the act of dancing together, the eyes of all dancers are shining and soft, accompanied by minor lateral neck-tilting motions, as they are looking at each other - their eyebrows and eyes are filled with the delight of the gathering and their cheerful, easy-going grins are in harmony with the uncomplicated nature of the Western Regions people ^[6]. There are also parts depicting the playful interactions of the everyday festive life, where dancers lift their arms up, take steps forward, and react to one another with dynamic and changing facial expressions - at times playfully bashful, at times warmly free. It is not necessary to use complex movements that are hard to make, but to create an atmosphere of relaxation and joy with only the help of eyebrow and eye movements. This dance does not use excessive body representations typical of the traditional Meshrep folk customs, but instead uses subtle facial expressions, emotional eyes, and life-like dance movements to materialize the spiritual vitality inherent in the folk culture. This is obviously shown by the fact that the soul of

Uyghur dance is the Spirit- the only way to give a dance performance a moving and authentic expression of power is to integrate inner feelings and outward actions ^[5].

4. “Dynamics”: The Layered Manifestation of Uyghur Dance

The concept of Dynamics in the aesthetic framework of ethnic folk dances is not about sheer brute physical effort, but a complex form of exertion and rhythmic strength developed by synthesizing motion and immobility, rigidity and suppleness, lightness and weight, as well as slow and fast tempo. Uyghur dance has this aesthetic feature in full, where the physical exertion has definite patterns - movements are sharp and clearly pronounced, and are layered in an organized way. The rhythmic beauty of power in alternating release and restraint has a particularity of its own that combines hardness and softness, tension and relaxation, and is therefore an idiosyncratic aspect that makes this dance stand out among other dance forms ^[1].

4.1 Rhyme, Layering, and Intensity of Dance Movements

Uyghur dance is considerably affected by syncopated rhythms and dotted beats of the Dap (frame drum) in regard to physical force management and rhythmic-layered expression. The kinetic logic of movement and stillness, as well as the kinetic logic of speed and slowness, is included in the performance process, which becomes a specific form of exertion to realize the goal of Dynamics ^[3]. This form of exertion has distinct physical gradations: the dancers apply gentle, sustained force in continuous movements like neck-shifting, wrist-circling, and waist-swaying so that the body lines appear smooth and natural; short, abrupt force is commonly applied to different freezing jumps and turning steps, which makes the finish of the movements neat and not dragged; stronger, more significant force is more noticeable when striding and stamping, which helps dancers establish their centre of gravity and creates a dramatic visual effect of dance ^[1].

To convey the concept of Dynamics, the whole dance is focused on the rhythmic changes in strong and weak alternation- frequently building up and resting strength on the weaker beats and letting it go on the stronger ones. The body actions have a lot of room to extend and spread out in three dimensions, and they are totally different from the same, repetitive movements of most ethnic dances, and slowly solidify into the distinctive energy expression and artistic direction of Uyghur dance^[3].

4.2 The Dynamic Pose (Liangxiang)

Dynamic pose is a very representative classical movement of the Uyghur dance. This posture does not merely demonstrate the full aesthetic value of Dynamics in the dance but also the complex physical forces involved. Such movements are characterized by their speed and agility: the body posture of the dancer, with his head raised and waist straight, may be easily frozen into a graceful and elongated beautiful shape. The entire effort of the pose is regulated by a sharp rhythm - on the one hand, it is smooth and flowing body rhythms that define the general atmosphere of the dance; on the other hand, it is completed in the moment of the Dap's strong rhythm, which makes the whole posture sharp and clean, which precisely ensures the accumulation of strength and its fast release of physical power ^[1].

The dynamic pose is a specific dance step that has a strong rhythmic character, which is typical of Uyghur dance. The feeling of power associated with such a posture is quite similar to the energetic and jumping rhythms of the Dap drum. Dancers respond to the dynamic alteration of the percussion patterns with an accurate perception of the timing of the force application and the rhythmic ends of motions. The constant change between tension and relaxation in movements

constantly enhances the general rhythm layering of the dance, and the clear short bursts of physical expression really show the special expansive agility and bold generous ethnic art temperament of Uyghur dance ^[3].

4.3 The Presence of Dynamics in Uyghur Dance-A Case Study of Dolan Huan'ge (Dolan Song of Joy)

As a traditional Dolan dance, Dolan Huan'ge clearly demonstrates the richness and variety of power rhythm in Uyghur dance, as the whole dance changes its different levels of force as per the altering strokes of the Dap drum ^[5]. At the start of the choreography, the dancers move slowly and gently swing their waists and rotate their wrists with minimal force, with long and graceful body lines. The short and sharp movements are used in the parts where there is stamping, fast wrist-folding stops, and spring-pointing steps, using the short and sharp inch-force and snap-force respectively, creating neat and precise movements. The characteristic Dolan stamping step, however, uses deep, sinking force, and the feet strike down hard, and the centre of gravity decreases gradually. There are many dynamic pose sections during the piece, wherein, prior to each pose that is presented, dancers will first loosen up their bodies by moving them slowly and relaxing, after which they will suddenly freeze when the Dap is struck hard, and the power release and restraint should be well-controlled. The principle of accumulating power on weak beats and releasing it on strong beats is observed throughout the performance, and there are distinct contrasts of lightness and heaviness, speed and slowness, which differentiate it from the ethnic dances of a single intensity. The diversity of changes in power in the work helps to underline the confidence, exuberance, warmth, and generosity of the ethnic temperament of the Uyghur people ^[2].

5. “Rhythm”: The Governing Principles of Uyghur Dance

In the context of ethnic folk dances in the aesthetics category, the term Rhythmic Regularity represents the internal kinetic tendency and operational principles underlying dance movements. The aesthetic component is mostly divided into two categories, which are regular rhythm and contrary rhythm. On the one hand, the regular and contrary rhythms are the basis of the choreographic plan of movement of the dance; on the other hand, these two rhythmic designs direct the general movement of tempo, which is the fundamental logic behind the performance of folk dance. Uyghur dance is flexible in its incorporation of both regular and contrary rhythm expressions, freeing it of a single, fixed rhythmic expression, giving the total dance fluid and lithe poses and abundant and clear layers. It also gives the dance form a very high level of uniqueness that is noticeable, which is the special rhythmic features of the Uyghur dance ^[3].

5.1 “Regular Rhythm” and “Contrary Rhythm”

Constant rhythm is based on the natural movement patterns of the body, allowing easy switching of various dance moves. The trembling knees, soft turning heads, and repeated wrist circles that are frequent in Uyghur dance all indicate the importance of this rhythm in real-life performance. With this kind of body care, the stage demonstration provides relaxation and gentleness to the viewers ^[7]. This type of stage effect created by contrary rhythm is very different compared to regular rhythm; the directional shifts in movement and rhythmic pauses become an extremely important artistic feature of this dance style. In a live performance, the paths of limb movements of the dancers can be altered during the execution or sometimes stop momentarily on a particular posture. These flexible adaptations depart from the stereotyped movement patterns, adding dynamic vitality to the dance and providing a dramatic visual difference. Constant rhythm provides a relaxed and natural basis for

dance performance, whereas contrary rhythm extends the range of expressivity of the body movements. The two rhythms cross over and counterbalance each other, forming together a rhythmic structure specific to Uyghur dance ^[3].

5.2 The incarnation of “Rhythm” in Uyghur dance-A case study of Damo Huang (Song of the Desert)

One of the most representative works of Uyghur dance is Damo Huang, which vividly represents the interlacing artistic condition of these two rhythmic systems, and its material performance on the stage reveals the underlying rhythmic characteristics of ethnic minority folk dances ^[3]. During the slow-tempo and lyrical parts of the piece, dancers keep a consistent frequency of knee tremors, with a slight movement of the neck and a continuous circular movement of the wrists, which finishes the physical execution according to the natural movement patterns of the body - this is the concrete embodiment of regular rhythm on stage. The long-lasting and gentle rhythmic feeling also creates a soft and open overall mood of the whole piece ^[7]. With the gradual development of the music to the emotionally intense and climactic sections, the drumbeats of the Dap become fast and strong, and the expressive tension of the opposite rhythm is expressed in full. In the advancement, dancers change the flexibility of the waist and hip sway; the initial continuous hand circles can be reversed temporarily; and the gliding step can come to a halt and freeze. These spontaneous movements turn and rhythmic pauses, which seem to be spontaneous, will escape the previous routine movements of the limbs, adding more visual elements to the visual representation presented on stage and bringing about such an aesthetic effect where movement and immobility mirror one another. An overall view of the composition shows that a regular rhythm provides a natural and smooth transition between different parts of the dance that preserves the graceful flow of movements and constantly communicates the internal beauty of the dance; contrary rhythm, however, disrupts the monotonous and steady-rhythm pattern, introducing significant dynamic variety and intricate stratification to the overall performance. The two rhythms weave and complement each other in the course of the show, showing the artistic properties of Uyghur dance that harmonize tension and relaxation and are filled with lively vitality. The rhythmic organization does not only play a significant role in the choreography of this piece, but also serves as the internal cause of the emergence of the specific artistic style of Uyghur dance ^[3].

6. Conclusion

On the basis of the analytical structure of the concept of form, Spirit, Dynamics, and Rhythm developed through the classical dance body rhythm, this paper systematically outlines the specific logic of the artistic expressions of Uyghur dance. The external postures are the intuitive visual identity of the dance, and they differentiate its bodily expression from other ethnic dances by using characteristic physical gestures like raising the neck, shaking knees, and swaying hips laterally. The inner spirit has its roots in the oasis lifestyle of the Western Regions and the traditions of Meshrep, and it is expressed by the eye expressions and the facial demeanor of the ethnic group, which are the source of the emotional appeal of the dance. There are three-layered patterns of application of forces, which go in parallel with the syncopated drumbeats of the Dap drum, switching between soft, heavy, and crisp forces, resulting in a uniquely textured quality of tension and release. The inner kinetic consistency, built on the basis of regular and contrary rhythms, creates the main logic behind the whole dance movement mechanism.

The four aesthetic components penetrate and reinforce each other in order to create an easily identifiable artistic style of Uyghur dance. The extension of this aesthetic model, which was originally based on classical dance, to folk dance studies also verifies the fact that the Form, Spirit,

Dynamics, and Rhythmic Regularity have a universal interpretative value that can be applied to different ethnic dances.

Due to the recent necessity to preserve ethnic culture and develop dances, the performance features obtained in the present research could be immediately useful towards the standardization of teaching the Uyghur dance in the classroom, which will enable the learners to understand the stylistic core, as well as offer clear examples of creativity in the creation of new stage choreographies. Entering further into the multicultural history of the Silk Road, memories of life in oases, and the ethnic soul of Uyghur dance may also allow such an individualistic folk dance step out of simple imitation of movement, reaching a higher level of living transmission. It will facilitate the further dissemination of the ethnic dance art of the Western Regions outwardly, making sure that it remains original in its artistic energy under the current cultural conditions over time.

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