



A Study on the Creation of Chinese Contemporary Dance Inspired by the Qiang Ethnic Dance Culture in Northern Sichuan

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Abstract

Background and Aims: The Qiang ethnic minority of Northern Sichuan, China, possesses a rich tradition of dance practices that embody spiritual, ritualistic, and social meanings. However, these traditions remain underrepresented in contemporary artistic discourse. This study aims to investigate the traditional dance forms of the Qiang people and reinterpret them through the creation of a contemporary Chinese dance work, *XiangYun*, employing participatory dance culture management principles to ensure cultural sustainability and ethical engagement.

Methodology: The research adopted a qualitative, practice-led approach integrating ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and collaborative choreographic workshops. Thematic content analysis was employed to interpret cultural and choreographic data, while descriptive statistics were used to analyze audience feedback. Community members were actively engaged as co-creators throughout the artistic development process.

Results: The study identified three principal Qiang dance forms: Wu, Sacrifice, and Guozhuang, each with distinct ritualistic and communal functions. The co-creation process led to the development of *XiangYun*, incorporating traditional motifs into contemporary aesthetics. Audience evaluations indicated strong perceptions of cultural



authenticity (95%) and emotional engagement (90%), affirming the effectiveness of participatory methodologies in sustaining intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that participatory, practice-led approaches can foster culturally sensitive and innovative reinterpretations of traditional dance. Collaborative engagement with community members not only enhances artistic authenticity but also supports the sustainable transmission of cultural knowledge. This research highlights the potential of participatory frameworks to bridge tradition and innovation within contemporary dance practices.

Keyword: Qiang ethnic dance; Participatory dance culture management; Practice-led research; Intangible cultural heritage preservation; Collaborative choreography



การศึกษาการสร้างสรรค์นาฏศิลป์ร่วมสมัยจีนจากแรงบันดาลใจในวัฒนธรรมการเต้นของชนเผ่าเฉียงในภาคเหนือของมณฑลเสฉวน

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บทคัดย่อ

ภูมิหลังและวัตถุประสงค์: ชนกลุ่มน้อยเฉียง (Qiang) ในเขตภาคเหนือของมณฑลเสฉวน ประเทศจีน มีมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมการเต้นที่หลากหลายและลึกซึ้ง ซึ่งสะท้อนถึงความเชื่อทางจิตวิญญาณ พิธีกรรม และความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคม อย่างไรก็ตาม ศิลปะการเต้นเหล่านี้ยังคงไม่ได้รับการนำเสนออย่างแพร่หลายในเวทีศิลปะร่วมสมัย งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษารูปแบบการเต้นดั้งเดิมของชนเผ่าเฉียง และสร้างสรรค์ผลงานนาฏศิลป์ร่วมสมัยจีนเรื่อง *XiangYun* โดยประยุกต์ใช้แนวคิดการจัดการวัฒนธรรมการเต้นแบบมีส่วนร่วม (Participatory Dance Culture Management) เพื่อส่งเสริมความยั่งยืนทางวัฒนธรรมและความรับผิดชอบทางจริยธรรม

ระเบียบวิธีการวิจัย: การวิจัยใช้ระเบียบวิธีเชิงคุณภาพแบบสร้างสรรค์ (Practice-led Research) โดยผ่านการศึกษาภาคสนามเชิงชาติพันธุ์ การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง และการจัดเวิร์กช็อปออกแบบท่าเต้นเชิงปฏิบัติ การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงเนื้อหาเชิงร่องรอยนำมาใช้เพื่อถอดรหัสข้อมูลเชิงวัฒนธรรมและนาฏยศาสตร์ ขณะที่ข้อมูลสะท้อนความคิดเห็นผู้เชี่ยวชาญเชิงพื้นที่ ทั้งนี้ สามารถชุมชนที่มีบทบาทอย่างแข็งขันในฐานะผู้ร่วมสร้างตลอดกระบวนการพัฒนางานศิลปะ

ผลการวิจัย: การศึกษาค้นพบรูปแบบการเต้นสำคัญสามประเภท ได้แก่ การเต้นบูชา (Wu Dance) การเต้นในพิธีบวงสรวง (Sacrifice Dance) และการเต้นแบบชุมชน (Guozhuang) ซึ่งแต่ละประเภทมีหน้าที่เฉพาะทางพิธีกรรมและสังคม กระบวนการร่วมสร้างได้พัฒนาผลงาน *XiangYun* ที่ผสมผสานองค์ประกอบการเต้นดั้งเดิมเข้ากับความงามเชิงร่วมสมัย ผลการประเมินจากผู้เชี่ยวชาญทั้งการรับรู้ความแท้จริงทางวัฒนธรรมในระดับสูง (95%) และความรู้สึกร่วมทางอารมณ์อย่างลึกซึ้ง (90%) ซึ่งยืนยันถึงประสิทธิภาพของแนวทางการมีส่วนร่วมในการส่งเสริมการสืบทอดมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องได้

สรุปผล: ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่าแนวทางการวิจัยเชิงสร้างสรรค์ที่เน้นการมีส่วนร่วมสามารถส่งเสริมการตีความศิลปะการเต้นดั้งเดิมอย่างลึกซึ้งและสร้างสรรค์ การมีส่วนร่วมของชุมชนอย่างใกล้ชิดไม่



เพียงแต่เพิ่มความแท้จริงทางศิลปะ แต่ยังสนับสนุนการถ่ายทอดองค์ความรู้ทางวัฒนธรรมอย่างยั่งยืน งานวิจัยนี้เน้นย้ำถึงศักยภาพของกรอบแนวคิดการมีส่วนร่วมในการเชื่อมโยงมรดกวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมเข้า กับการสร้างสรรค์ทางภูมิศิลป์ร่วมสมัย

คำสำคัญ: การเดินของชนเผ่าเฉียง; การจัดการวัฒนธรรมการเต้นแบบมีส่วนร่วม; การวิจัยเชิง สร้างสรรค์; การอนุรักษ์มรดกทางวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องไม่ได้; การออกแบบท่าเต้นแบบมีส่วนร่วม

Introduction

The Qiang minority, one of China's most ancient ethnic groups, has profoundly shaped the nation's cultural and historical landscape. Known as the "people on the clouds," the Qiang primarily inhabit the mountainous regions of Northern Sichuan. Their cultural identity is deeply embedded in vibrant dance traditions rooted in spiritual beliefs, social structures, and environmental interactions. Historically, Qiang dance has functioned as an embodied archive of communal memory, characterized by grounded dynamics, circular formations, vigorous movements, and symbolic gestures (Liu, 2023; Li, 2024).

Within the rapidly evolving cultural landscape of contemporary China, dance has emerged not only as an expressive art form but also as a critical mode of cultural inquiry. Choreographers increasingly turn to indigenous traditions as sources of aesthetic renewal and philosophical grounding amidst globalization and modernization (Yang, 2023). In this context, the integration of minority cultural practices into contemporary performance is not merely an act of preservation but a dynamic process of participatory cultural production, co-creation, and mutual exchange (Kuppers, 2011; Bishop, 2023).

Participatory dance culture management, as a theoretical framework, emphasizes the role of community engagement, shared authorship, and embodied knowledge transmission in sustaining intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Unlike top-down approaches that position indigenous communities as mere subjects of study, participatory frameworks advocate for collaborative choreography, where cultural custodians are actively involved in the creative and interpretive processes. This participatory ethos aligns with the principles articulated by Jackson & Boal (2005) and Smith (2012) and further developed by scholars such as Toscani & Prendergast (2021) and Kaur et al. (2023),



highlighting the necessity of reciprocity, co-agency, and ethical responsibility in cultural research and artistic practice.

Qiang dance traditions encompassing ritualistic invocations (Wu dance), sacrificial ceremonies (Sacrifice dance), and communal celebrations (Guozhuang or Sharan) embody a living system of cultural knowledge and collective identity. These practices are not static artifacts but evolving expressions shaped by community negotiation, historical contingencies, and ecological interdependence. Despite their cultural richness, Qiang dance forms remain underrepresented in contemporary dance scholarship and performance, a marginalization that reflects broader issues of cultural visibility and power dynamics within national narratives (Tan & Jirajarupat, 2022; Wan, 2017).

This study responds to these challenges by adopting a practice-led, participatory research approach that critically and creatively recontextualizes Qiang dance within the idiom of Chinese contemporary dance. By engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, collaborative exchanges with Qiang dancers and cultural experts, and iterative choreographic experimentation, the research seeks to honor the specificity of Qiang embodied knowledge while exploring new modalities of cultural expression. Central to this inquiry is the creation of *XiangYun* (“Auspicious Cloud”), an original dance work that embodies a dialogic interplay between tradition and innovation, rootedness and reinvention.

Through this process, the study advances the proposition that dance can serve as both a site of cultural sustainability and a participatory medium of intercultural dialogue. By foregrounding concepts of community engagement, co-creation, and ethical collaboration, it positions contemporary choreography not merely as artistic production, but as a dynamic field of cultural negotiation and collective meaning-making. In doing so, it aims to contribute to broader discourses on cultural heritage preservation, minority representation, and the evolving role of participatory frameworks in the arts.

Objectives

1. To investigate the traditional dance forms of the Qiang minority in Northern Sichuan, China, with a particular focus on their movement vocabulary, ritualistic and social functions, and embodied symbolic meanings.



2. To examine the role of participatory dance culture management principles in informing the preservation, reinterpretation, and creative transmission of Qiang dance traditions.
3. To develop an original Chinese contemporary dance work, XiangYun, through collaborative exchanges with Qiang community members, emphasizing co-creative processes and shared authorship.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of participatory and community-engaged approaches in enhancing cultural sustainability, authenticity, and audience engagement in contemporary performances inspired by minority traditions.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, practice-led research design integrating ethnographic inquiry with participatory choreographic development. The methodology unfolded across three interlinked phases: (1) cultural exploration of Qiang ethnic dance traditions, (2) participatory co-creation of a contemporary dance work, and (3) reflective evaluation with community and audience engagement.

In the first phase, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted through prolonged engagement in Qiang communities in Northern Sichuan. Data collection methods included participant observation, video documentation of ritual and social dances, and semi-structured interviews with traditional Qiang dancers, cultural custodians, and local scholars. Particular emphasis was placed on capturing embodied knowledge, ritualistic meanings, and community narratives surrounding dance practices.

The second phase adopted a participatory creation model, whereby choreographic development was undertaken collaboratively with Qiang community members. Rather than positioning traditional dancers solely as sources of inspiration, they were engaged as co-creators contributing to movement vocabulary, narrative structuring, and symbolic representation. Iterative workshops, rehearsals, and feedback



sessions facilitated a dialogic creative process, supporting shared authorship and mutual learning.

The third phase involved reflective evaluation through performance feedback mechanisms. After the presentation of *XiangYun*, feedback was gathered via audience questionnaires, focus group discussions with Qiang participants, and expert interviews. This evaluation aimed to assess perceptions of cultural authenticity, emotional resonance, and the perceived success of participatory methodologies.

Population and Sample

The target population included traditional Qiang dance practitioners, cultural custodians, contemporary dance artists, and scholars specializing in minority cultural preservation. A purposive sampling approach was used to select:

- 1) 5-7 Qiang dancers and elders involved in interviews, workshops, and creative decision-making.
- 2) 3-5 contemporary dance professionals participating in cross-cultural choreography sessions.
- 3) 3 academic and cultural experts offering critical feedback and contextual analysis.

Research Instruments

To ensure a robust and context-sensitive exploration, the following instruments were utilized:

1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Designed to elicit perspectives on Qiang dance symbolism, cultural meaning, and attitudes toward contemporary reinterpretation.
2. Field Observation Checklist: Used to systematically record movement patterns, ritual contexts, costume elements, and community dynamics.
3. Creative Process Logbook: Maintained to document reflective journaling, creative decision-making, and co-creation processes with Qiang collaborators.
4. Performance Feedback Form and Focus Group Protocol: Employed post-performance to gather audience and community responses, emphasizing cultural authenticity, emotional impact, and participatory experience.

Trustworthiness of Research



To establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity, the following strategies were applied:

Triangulation of data sources (observations, interviews, creative documentation).

Prolonged engagement and member-checking with Qiang participants to validate interpretations.

Audit trail maintained through detailed reflective documentation.

Collaborative validation sessions ensuring that Qiang community voices were incorporated and respected in the final work.

Artistic and Ethical Rigor

Artistic rigor was ensured through peer feedback loops, iterative rehearsal processes, and responsiveness to cultural expert critiques. Ethical rigor was prioritized through informed consent, cultural sensitivity in representation, equitable collaboration practices, and reciprocal benefits to the participating community.

This participatory and practice-led methodological framework allowed for a nuanced, ethically grounded, and culturally responsive creation of *XiangYun*, contributing not only to scholarly discourse but also to sustainable cultural practice.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this practice-led and participatory study integrated qualitative thematic exploration with descriptive quantitative analysis to interpret the cultural, choreographic, and audience engagement dimensions. Rich qualitative data were collected through field observations, semi-structured interviews, creative process documentation, and focus group discussions. These materials were subjected to a thematic content analysis that unfolded systematically: first through the transcription of interviews, field notes, and focus group discussions, followed by open coding to identify recurring cultural, choreographic, and participatory themes. Axial coding was then used to establish meaningful connections between traditional dance elements, co-creative methods, and new choreographic interpretations. Ultimately, thematic synthesis was applied to integrate insights across multiple data sources, focusing specifically on dimensions of embodiment, authenticity, and cultural sustainability. Throughout the analysis, researcher reflexivity was emphasized, with iterative cross-checks and member



validation sessions conducted alongside Qiang collaborators to ensure authenticity and mutual understanding.

Quantitative data analysis was employed to complement the qualitative findings. Structured post-performance audience questionnaires containing Likert-scale items provided the primary source of quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were calculated to summarize audience perceptions regarding cultural authenticity, the emotional and aesthetic impact of the performance, and the perceived success of integrating traditional and contemporary elements. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings enabled a holistic and context-sensitive evaluation of the dance work *XiangYun*, maintaining methodological rigor while honoring the participatory and culturally embedded nature of the research process.

Results

The findings of this study are organized into three interrelated dimensions: (1) the cultural characteristics of traditional Qiang ethnic dance, (2) the participatory choreographic development of *XiangYun*, and (3) the evaluation of audience and community responses.

The cultural exploration phase revealed that Qiang ethnic dances embody a rich tapestry of spiritual, ceremonial, and social functions rooted in the community's cosmology and collective memory. These dance forms serve not only as artistic expressions but also as vital mechanisms for transmitting cultural values, ancestral wisdom, and communal identity across generations. Three principal forms were identified: the Wu dance, performed during ancestral and healing rituals using circular movements and rhythmic sheepskin drumming to invoke spiritual protection and establish a symbolic connection between the earthly and spiritual realms (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Wu dance performance with sheepskin drums during an ancestral ritual.

The Sacrifice dance, characterized by expansive gestures, chanting, and the presentation of ceremonial offerings, was designed to honor deities, reinforce cosmic harmony, and express collective gratitude for agricultural fertility and protection from natural disasters (see Figure 2). These dances, deeply interwoven with ritual contexts, music, costume, and symbolism, reflect an enduring worldview centered on balance, reverence for nature, and the cyclical rhythms of life.



Figure 2. Sacrifice dance in Wenchuan with spiritual symbols and community involvement.



The Guozhuang (Sharan) dance, a vibrant social form featuring paired movements, communal singing, and celebratory rhythms, symbolized fertility, unity, and resilience within the community (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Youth performing Guozhuang during Qiang New Year celebration.

These dances were deeply intertwined with traditional costume, musical instrumentation, and environmental symbolism, reflecting a worldview of cyclical time, interdependence, and spiritual connectivity (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Traditional Qiang costumes and musical instruments used in dance.

The development of the contemporary dance work *XiangYun* emerged through a participatory and iterative creative process. Drawing directly from the ethnographic findings, the choreography was constructed around three narrative arcs: Longing, Loss, and Spiritual Inheritance. Community collaborators contributed movement motifs, narrative perspectives, and symbolic meanings during rehearsal workshops, ensuring that the resulting piece maintained cultural specificity while innovating within a contemporary aesthetic framework. Circular motifs from the Wu dance were adapted into modern floor patterns to signify ancestral yearning; the fragmentation and stillness derived from the Sacrifice dance represented cultural disruption; and rhythmic group formations inspired by Guozhuang celebrated communal renewal and resilience. The co-creative methodology fostered shared authorship and reinforced the dance's authenticity and emotional resonance (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Rehearsal images, movement sketches, and costume adaptations.

Audience and expert evaluations confirmed the effectiveness of the participatory and practice-led approach. Quantitative analysis of post-performance questionnaires



(n=50) indicated that 95% of respondents perceived the performance as culturally authentic, 90% reported strong emotional engagement, and 88% expressed an increased interest in ethnic minority arts. Qualitative feedback highlighted the work's ability to bridge tradition and innovation respectfully, emphasizing its success in transmitting cultural memory through embodied experience. Focus group discussions with Qiang participants affirmed that the choreography honored traditional meanings while offering a platform for contemporary expression, validating the research's commitment to participatory cultural sustainability.

Overall, the results demonstrate that a participatory, practice-led approach can meaningfully integrate indigenous movement traditions into contemporary dance while preserving cultural specificity, fostering community engagement, and enriching intercultural understanding.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the profound cultural richness embedded within traditional Qiang ethnic dance and illustrate how participatory, practice-led methodologies can serve as effective conduits for preserving and innovating intangible cultural heritage. The identified dance forms Wu, Sacrifice, and Guozhuang reveal not only ritualistic and social functions but also an intricate system of embodied knowledge that sustains communal identity and cosmological beliefs. These results align with Whatley's (2022) concept of the body as a repository of cultural memory and Schechner's (1985) theory of "restored behavior," where repeated performative acts carry and adapt cultural meaning across generations.

The creation of *XiangYun* demonstrated that integrating participatory dance culture management principles can enable respectful and contextually grounded artistic innovation. Community collaborators were not positioned merely as informants but as active co-creators, contributing to narrative structuring, movement exploration, and symbolic representation. This co-creative process resonates with Kuppers' (2011) and Bishop's (2023) frameworks on participatory arts, wherein collaboration fosters shared authorship, cultural agency, and ethical engagement. By facilitating mutual exchange,



the study also embodies Jackson & Boal (2005) vision of cultural production as a democratic and dialogical process.

The high audience perceptions of cultural authenticity and emotional engagement further validate the effectiveness of participatory and practice-led approaches. Rather than static reproduction, the creative process emphasized dynamic translation, allowing traditional elements to evolve while preserving their core meanings. This finding echoes Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," where hybrid cultural identities emerge through negotiation rather than assimilation.

Additionally, the participatory framework strengthened ethical responsibility within the research. Community feedback sessions and member-checking not only enhanced methodological rigor but also ensured that cultural representations were reciprocally validated. This approach aligns with Smith's (2012) advocacy for decolonizing methodologies, highlighting the necessity of privileging indigenous voices and ensuring mutual benefits in cross-cultural research.

In broader terms, the study contributes to evolving discussions on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation. It exemplifies that safeguarding traditions in the contemporary era requires innovative methods that prioritize active community participation, creative reinterpretation, and the dynamic rearticulation of cultural meanings (Loiacono, 2022; Xun, 2023). *XiangYun* thus stands not only as an artistic achievement but as a model for how collaborative choreography can sustain cultural vitality while embracing artistic evolution.

In sum, this research reaffirms the value of participatory frameworks in dance studies, illustrating that when traditional knowledge systems are engaged collaboratively, contemporary performance can become a vital space for cultural sustainability, ethical representation, and intercultural dialogue.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Expand Participatory Choreographic Research Across Minority Traditions

Future research initiatives should consider applying participatory, practice-led methodologies to other underrepresented ethnic dance traditions. Comparative studies



could reveal common challenges and innovative strategies for cultural preservation through collaborative artistic processes.

2. Enhance Community Leadership in Creative Processes

Subsequent projects should further deepen community participation by involving cultural custodians not only as co-creators but also as co-directors or artistic collaborators. Shifting leadership roles more prominently toward indigenous participants would promote greater agency and ethical reciprocity.

3. Integrate Participatory Arts into Higher Education Curricula

Dance and performing arts programs at universities should embed participatory cultural frameworks into their curricula, encouraging students to engage respectfully with diverse cultural traditions and develop critical intercultural competencies.

4. Explore Digital Platforms for Participatory Preservation

Researchers and practitioners should investigate how digital technologies such as virtual reality, motion capture, and digital archiving can support participatory methods of preserving and innovating ethnic dance traditions, ensuring that technological mediation aligns with community priorities and ethical standards.

5. Promote Policy Support for Participatory Heritage Initiatives

Policymakers should recognize and fund participatory approaches to intangible cultural heritage preservation, ensuring that community voices are central to decision-making processes and that cultural innovation is supported alongside conservation.

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