



ON THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM ELEMENTS IN CHINESE FOLK DANCE


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Abstract: Chinese folk dance, as a vibrant expression of art, serves as a conduit for the rich tapestry of folk culture, historical tradition, religious philosophy and mysticism. This study delves into these elements within Chinese folk dance, analyzing their cultural connotations and spiritual significance. It begins with the origins of folk dance, exploring the characteristics, concepts and cultural types of dance, and establishes their interconnectedness. Furthermore, it examines the role of religious philosophy and mysticism in enriching the content and form of dance, highlighting their deep social and spiritual value. Research has shown that understanding the religious and mystical elements of Chinese folk dance is essential for cultural preservation and education. Integrating these elements into educational curricula and cultural conservation efforts can cultivate the younger generation's understanding of China's intangible cultural heritage and keep the traditions alive and relevant. This not only enriches the educational experience, but also promotes the continuation and development of traditional Chinese culture.


Keywords: Chinese Folk Dance. Religious Philosophy. Mysticism Elements. Primitive Dance. Patriarchal Relationship.

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Resumo: A dança folclórica chinesa, como uma expressão vibrante de arte, serve como um canal para a rica tapeçaria da cultura folclórica, da tradição histórica, da filosofia religiosa e do misticismo. Este estudo aprofunda-se nesses elementos da dança folclórica chinesa, analisando suas conotações culturais e seu significado espiritual. Ele começa com as origens da dança folclórica, explorando as características, os conceitos e os tipos culturais da dança, e estabelece sua interconexão. Além disso, examina o papel da filosofia religiosa e do misticismo no enriquecimento do conteúdo e da forma da dança, destacando seu profundo valor social e espiritual. Pesquisas demonstraram que a compreensão dos elementos religiosos e místicos da dança folclórica chinesa é essencial para a preservação cultural e a educação. A integração desses elementos, nos currículos educacionais e nos esforços de conservação cultural, pode cultivar a compreensão da geração mais jovem sobre o patrimônio cultural intangível da China e manter as tradições vivas e relevantes. Isso não apenas enriquece a experiência educacional, mas também promove a continuação e o desenvolvimento da cultura tradicional chinesa.

Palavras-chave: Dança Folclórica Chinesa. Filosofia Religiosa. Elementos do Misticismo. Dança Primitiva. Relacionamento Patriarcal.

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ON THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM ELEMENTS IN CHINESE FOLK DANCE

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Abstract: Chinese folk dance, as a vibrant expression of art, serves as a conduit for the rich tapestry of folk culture, historical tradition, religious philosophy and mysticism. This study delves into these elements within Chinese folk dance, analyzing their cultural connotations and spiritual significance. It begins with the origins of folk dance, exploring the characteristics, concepts and cultural types of dance, and establishes their interconnectedness. Furthermore, it examines the role of religious philosophy and mysticism in enriching the content and form of dance, highlighting their deep social and spiritual value. Research has shown that understanding the religious and mystical elements of Chinese folk dance is essential for cultural preservation and education. Integrating these elements into educational curricula and cultural conservation efforts can cultivate the younger generation's understanding of China's intangible cultural heritage and keep the traditions alive and relevant. This not only enriches the educational experience, but also promotes the continuation and development of traditional Chinese culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese ethnic folk dance, rich in the cultural and historical essence of China's ethnic communities, integrates religious philosophies and mysticism, reflecting deep spiritual significance and human psychological growth. This study investigates underexplored elements of Xiangxi dances, focusing on the interplay between their expressive forms and spiritual values. By doing so, it aims to uncover their role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and enhancing international cultural exchanges. The goal is to highlight the practical implications of understanding these mystical and religious aspects, advocating for their importance in global cultural appreciation and integration.

Chinese ethnic folk dance, a cornerstone of traditional Chinese folk culture, embodies the historical and cultural essence of China's diverse ethnic communities. Through

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centuries of evolution, these dances have interwoven religious philosophies and mysticism, offering not only a unique aesthetic experience, but also a deep spiritual significance that reflects on human psychology and growth (Rahapsari, 2022, p. 413).

The rich dance art from the regions of Xiangxi, celebrated as a cradle of singing and dancing, exemplifies the enduring nature and cultural depth of heritage dance, serves as a ritualistic expression of reverence for the divine and natural rhythms, encapsulating various beliefs and attitudes (Li, 2020, p. 44). The folk dance performances in the Spring Festival Gala, blending traditional and modern elements with a focus on innovative forms and stage effects, aim to embrace international culture while showcasing China's cultural confidence and openness, supported by its rich dance education heritage and the strengthening ties with global dance institutions, fostering a dialogue that bridges cultural divides (Meng, 2023; Jin; Martin, 2019). This paper makes an in-depth analysis of religious philosophy and mysticism elements in Chinese folk dance, reveals their deep connection with religious thought and emphasizes the importance of understanding these elements to fully grasp the cultural connotation of dance.

1 UNDERSTANDING OF CHINESE FOLK DANCE

1.1 ORIGIN OF FOLK DANCE

Originating from folk culture, folk dance expresses social life through body movements and reflects national history and cultural uniqueness. Folk customs include spiritual, psychological, ceremonial, religious and ritual traditions. We can find primitive forms of dance in unearthed cultural relics, original murals and carvings, and its performance involves various aspects of social customs, such as labor, war, worship, entertainment and sex. Folk dances evolved from primitive dances. With the society's development and the slave society's entry, primitive dance underwent division, with one part becoming a performance of slavery and the other becoming a palace dance, evolving from religious ritual dance or other social function dance to folk dance (Shu, 2018, p. 56).

After entering the feudal era, in the long process of social development, people's original way of life and social concepts have not been completely changed due to changes in social and economic structures. Therefore, some cultural ideas and customs have been left behind in folk dance (Zhang, 2021, p. 21). Tibetan daily postures, shaped by religious beliefs, emotional psychology, physical labor and lifestyle, manifest in dance as sitting on hips, bowing and bending, forming the distinctive characteristics and rhythmic style of Tibetan dance. Religious dance is integral to dance culture development and ancient Chinese dance, bearing religious, political and aesthetic value. It encapsulates social life. Its intricate

structure, dynamic movements and graceful forms have profoundly influenced dance art, especially contemporary dance.

Religious worship is a folk belief custom. Its role and stimulation on folk dance have had both positive and negative impacts throughout history. On the one hand, the infiltration of religious customs has stimulated the improvement of dance level. On the other hand, the rebound of folk customs has lowered the taste of dance, resulting in a decline in entertainment and functionality, a decline in aesthetics and aesthetics, and various historical and regional reasons. “This kind of positive and negative influence is often superimposed, compounded, and miscible with each other” (Pennycook *et al.*, 2020, p. 476).

1.2 CONCEPTS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF FOLK DANCE

Folk dance is a dance that is directly created by the working people in the process of material and spiritual civilization development in a nation or region, and is inherited and still disseminated among the people (Li, 2020, p. 117). Folk dance, distinct from folklore one, encompasses dances of the Han and 56 ethnic minorities. Each has ancient, palace and folk dances. Originating from labor and life, folk dance expresses cultural traditions, customs and a nation’s spiritual views or the ones of a region, hence its name. While folklore dance, it refers to various folklore dances that are still popular today and mainly used for people’s entertainment. Although it is a part of folk dance, it covers the folk dances of all nationalities. Therefore, when using the term ‘folk dance’, it is more accurate to refer to it with ethnic names, such as Han folk dance and Uyghur folk dance (Huang, 2020, p. 226).

“Folk dance, as the mother of all creative dances, has formed its own characteristics over thousands of years of development” (Liao; Zheng, 2023, p. 174). This inheritance preserves ancient life’s imagery, cultural imprints, and links to traditional concepts and folk activities. It evolves, carrying national tradition. The blend of local and ethnic features, shaped by geography, nature and more, exhibits distinct ethnic and regional cultural traits. In history, these dances have been transformed by rulers into palace and stage dances, which can be absorbed by drama and used by religion (Şuşu, 2018, p. 127). Folk dance is the result of the people’s common creation, which spreads directly to the people’s mass communication. It is not only easy to learn, but also stable in form. Its action is also relatively fixed, and it can also create new content at will. Folk dance is a kind of public self-entertainment, which is influenced by traditional culture and national spirit through self-entertainment, such as folk dance in the context of Serbian Ethnology (Rašić, 2018, p. 53).

1.3 OVERVIEW AND IMPORTANCE OF FOLK DANCE

The current Chinese folk dance encompasses the dance forms and cultural characteristics of various periods in China (Huang; Gao, 2021, p. 144). For example, Oroqen people imitate the dancing of birds and animals, and Wa and Jingpo people's ceremonial dancing are all relics of primitive dancing. There are still traces of ancient witchcraft in Naxi people dance, such as Dongba dance, Dai's Peacock dance, Uygur's pan dance and so on, which have become a kind of dance art with performance nature. From primitive dance relics to artistic dance forms, a series of dances exist at the same time, which is the overall feature of Chinese folk dance and a cultural phenomenon of it, as shown in Figures 1.

Figure 1 – Different types of ethnic dances

- a. Tibetan ethnic dance b and c. Dai and ethnic dance and ethnic peacock dance
 d. Shaanbei Ansai Waist Drum ethnic dance e. Yunnan ethnic dance



Source: Body (2004, p. 310)

Some people classify Chinese folk dance into five categories, namely agricultural culture, grassland culture, marine culture, agricultural and pastoral culture, and oasis one. The type of agricultural culture has a peaceful and harmonious movement rhythm, rich and beautiful dance movements, and diverse forms of expression, with agricultural dance as the main focus and emphasis on the combination of music, dance and changes in formation images. The dances of the sea breeze culture type are mostly similar to those of the agricultural culture one, only rendering some of the colors of the sea. The most representative ones are the Li nationality and Mesa ethnicity on the island.

Tibet, Qiang and Naxi people are the most representative ethnic groups in the unique farming and pastoral cultural style, which has both farming and pastoral cultural characteristics and religious color. This is an art with ancient Silk Road customs. Its performance form is the inheritance and development of ancient Western music and dance. The dances of Uyghur, Uzbek and Tajik belong to this category (Chan, 2018, p. 13).

National folk dance is a form of dance passed down from generation to generation. It pays attention to physical and mental entertainment and displays a nation's traditional culture and ideological connotation. It is rich in content, brings comfortable feeling and profound cultural experience, is a symbol of national culture and precious spiritual wealth, and embodies people's respect for national culture. Modern national folk dance originated from the folk, higher than it, with national culture as the creation standard.

With the acceleration of modernization, the local culture of minority nationalities is facing the crisis of loss. In order to protect national culture, dance teachers should bear the responsibility, and dance researchers should go beyond teaching skills and pay attention to local culture. Learners should have a deep understanding of national culture in dance, learn authentic dance from the source, apply local culture flexibly in teaching and create excellent works with local characteristics.

2 RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM CULTURE

Religious philosophy, as the name suggests, is a historical product of interaction between religion and philosophy. People may be curious that religion is an irrational belief, while philosophy is a rational speculative activity. In fact, the basic definition of religious philosophy is to explain the root causes and order behind existing religious phenomena, and try to avoid faith positions and study religion with a rational attitude. So more specifically, religious philosophy refers to the use of philosophical viewpoints and conceptual explanations to argue the doctrine of religion, and to study the fundamental issues of religion from a rational perspective, such as its essence, norms, worldview, moral views, language, symbolic significance, and so on.

As a religious and philosophical concept, mysticism is widely present in major religious and philosophical traditions around the world. The Orphic sect, a secret Greek religion popular in the 8th century BC, advocated for the immortality and reincarnation of the soul. Some scholars classify mysticism into three types, based on the different objects of unity: naturalistic mysticism, pantheistic mysticism and theistic mysticism (Ladous, 2005, p. 366).

In the rich tapestry of Chinese folk dance, the integration of religious philosophy and mysticism not only shapes the thematic and symbolic expressions of the dance, but

also deeply influences the movements themselves. This evolution can be traced back to early theoretical foundations, such as those described in the ancient text “Le Ji,” where the interconnectedness of sound, human emotion and the external world suggests that dance arises naturally from profound philosophical contemplations of heaven, earth and the human heart.

This conceptual framework informs us that Chinese dance, initially intertwined with societal functions like religion, politics and other communal rituals, gradually began to articulate its own identity, showcasing unique laws of development as an art form. This transition from functional to artistic autonomy reflects a broader historical context where dance, originally linked to ritual and shamanistic practices (as indicated by the separate oracle bone characters for “dance” and “witch”), started to embody a distinct aesthetic and philosophical identity.

By examining these historical and philosophical underpinnings, we can gain a deeper understanding of how mysticism and religious philosophy have not only contributed to the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of Chinese folk dance, but have also empowered it to become a medium for cultural expression and identity. This approach allows readers to appreciate the intricate layers of meaning embedded in the movements and themes of Chinese folk dance, revealing its significance as a dynamic and evolving form of cultural narrative. It is not that Chinese people have no religion, but the content and structure of religion in China are very complex, especially folk religions (Jasper, 2018, p. 131).

The intricate relationship between religion, philosophy and mysticism in China profoundly influences its cultural expressions, including the rich tradition of Chinese folk dance. The spiritual and philosophical dimensions of these dances are reflective of a broader cultural ethos, wherein religion and mysticism intermingle with daily life and artistic expression.

In China, religion often subtly influences the society’s structure, with Buddhist and Taoist philosophies having different influences on literati and common people. Intellectuals tended to philosophize, while ordinary people practiced these beliefs more in daily rituals and folk customs. This duality adds complexity to the interweaving of mysticism and religious philosophy with the narrative of Chinese folk dance.

Chinese folk dance has always been a medium for telling spiritual and religious stories and passing on cultural values. Dance movements, costumes and music often contain symbolic elements of religious belief and mystical philosophy, such as imitating the flow of Taoist “chi” (energy) or representing the Buddhist journey to enlightenment. The blend of animism, ancestor worship and shamanistic practices of the Chinese folk religion has deeply influenced the thematic elements of dances that are not only entertaining, but also used to pray for blessings, communicate divine powers, or commemorate historical and mythological

events. As society progressed, dance functioned beyond religious rituals to become a form of telling cultural stories and aesthetic enjoyment, but its spiritual and philosophical themes persisted, maintaining ties to its mystical and religious roots.

Understanding the influence of religious philosophy and mysticism on Chinese folk dance will help us to understand deeply the interweaving of the sacred and the secular in Chinese culture. This approach not only enriches the interpretation of dance performance, but also highlights the unique way in which Chinese culture navigates and negotiates its spiritual and philosophical identity through art. This exploration enhances our appreciation of Chinese folk dance as an art form and its evolving dialogue between ancient and modern, spiritual and material, individual and collective.

2.1 STRONG PATRIARCHALISM

After entering a civilized era, China developed a patriarchal society from an early age, a structure distinctly different from the Western countries' historical development (Ghosh, *et al.*, 2020, p. 52). The essence of this patriarchal system is the emphasis on male dominance and the distribution of property and rights based on patriarchal relations, which are universally acknowledged. Thus, society is fundamentally composed of families and clans, with the traditional state being an extension of the family unit.

To support the patriarchal and familial systems, ancient states upheld the doctrine of divine power and ancestral blessings, politicizing Confucianism and incorporating the teaching of rites and music into its fabric. Confucian philosophy, deeply rooted in ethics, underscores blood relations based on familial ethics, advocating that love begins with one's parents, thus reinforcing kinship bonds. Moreover, within this system, kings could view the state as their personal domain and the citizenry as their own family, exercising absolute authority, which theoretically bolstered the patriarchal structure and, thus, garnered high regard from rulers.

Historically, to formalize this philosophy, temples were constructed for sacrificing to Confucius, beginning with Emperor Yuan of Han and embedding the practice of Confucian sacrifices from the officialdom to all societal levels. Alongside the veneration of saints and ancestors, the ethical doctrines of Confucianism gradually permeated the populace. Given that the lower classes were often uneducated and lacked access to scriptures, Confucian teachings were primarily disseminated through sacrificial rituals and various religiously persuasive texts, rather than direct preaching.

2.2 TRIPLE BELIEF STRUCTURE WITH DIVISION AND COMBINATION

“The beliefs of Chinese people are biased due to their social status, forming three interconnected and independent systems: the official system, the literati system, and the folk system” (Bakhtiyor, 2020, p. 1266). The above patriarchal characteristics are not only a universal feature of religion in China, but also reflected in the mutual penetration of various religious sects. However, in addition to official religions, folk religions also have a more complex world system of gods, and the religions of literati are also more independent (Gallego Alvarez *et al.*, 2020, p. 570).

In terms of folk religion, after China’s transition from a clan society to an ancient country, unlike other ethnic groups, they did not separate from the prehistoric religion. Instead, they were replaced by a unified national creative religion, which was shared by all people. They still maintained their worship of ghosts, gods and nature, especially gods, ancestors and saints. From the traditional perspective, there are few religious beliefs and few atheism among Chinese people. Their religion is not a kind of spiritual comfort, but more a kind of utilitarianism. They have no fixed standards for the deities they believe in, but are constantly changing. The combination of gods makes the secularization of Chinese religion reflected in folk religion (Mo *et al.*, 2023, p. 685).

2.3 MUTUAL TOLERANCE AMONG DIVERSE BELIEFS

Monotheistic belief is an advanced form of monotheism, which evolved from prehistoric religion. The emergence of monotheism is often related to multiple ethnic groups’ integration, and it is also the nation-state’s objective need, which requires a spiritual unity. A unified ethnic religion has a strong exclusiveness in its internal integration function, that is, it worships its own religion as a god and other religions as heresy. Throughout the world, there are a lot of religious conflicts both in history and in contemporary terms, but this phenomenon has not occurred in China (Raymond, 2020, p. 346).

Chinese culture has always had a tradition of inclusiveness. As the great biography of the *Book of Changes* said, “A hundred schools of thought are the same, and a hundred schools of thought are the same but different” (Yang *et al.* 2003 p. 218).

Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have fought against one another. The coexistence of various subcultures shows the inclusiveness of this culture. Buddhism was not only introduced in a peaceful manner, but was mainly dominated by the Chinese people, who have been collecting and translating scriptures for hundreds of years. Moreover, other sects also entered in a peaceful manner. It is rare in other countries that all religions can live together peacefully and even practice two or three religions (He, 2018, p. 51).

To provide a deeper analysis of how religious philosophy and mysticism influence the themes, movements and symbolism of Chinese folk dance, it is essential to explore specific examples that illustrate these impacts. This approach not only clarifies the theoretical discussion, but also grounds the analysis in observable practice.

A poignant example is the Dragon Dance, deeply rooted in Taoist symbolism. The dragon, in Chinese culture, is not merely a mythical creature, but a symbol of wisdom, power and the yang principle, which is fundamental in Taoist cosmology. The dragon's serpentine movements, in the dance, reflect the flow of Qi, or life force, believed to govern the natural world. Each twist and coil of the dragon's body, during the dance, is emblematic of the Taoist view of the universe as dynamic and constantly in flux.

Another example is the Fan Dance, often performed during Buddhist festivals. The fan, in the dance, symbolizes the spreading of Buddhist teachings. The opening and closing movements of the fan are symbolic of the opening of the heart and mind to enlightenment. The dancers' delicate and flowing movements with their fans can be seen as a metaphor for the gentle dissemination of spiritual wisdom and the transient nature of existence, aligning with Buddhist concepts of impermanence and non-attachment.

These examples highlight the tangible ways in which religious philosophy and mysticism are woven into the fabric of Chinese folk dance, affecting not only the choreographic elements, but also enriching the cultural and spiritual narratives expressed through dance. By examining these practices, we gain a fuller understanding of the depth and complexity of the interplay between dance and spirituality in Chinese culture.

3 CONNECTION BETWEEN CHINESE FOLK DANCE AND RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM ELEMENTS

3.1 EXPRESSIONS

Chinese folk dance is full of religious philosophy and mysterious colors, including myths and legends, sacrificial ceremonies and mysterious symbols. The most common way of expression in Chinese folk dance is through myths and legends. "Unity of heaven and humanity" depicts the images of various gods, beasts and spirits with dancers' postures, showing a mythical world for people. Our ancestors' myths and legends reflect people's worship psychology towards them, and there are also many records of dance, which can be regarded as precious records of the primitive dance of the entire Chinese civilization in ancient books. Among them, famous ones include the "Fulai Dance" praising the Fuxi clan, the "Fuli Dance" praising the Shennong clan, the "Yunmen Dajuan Dance", during the Yellow Emperor's reign, the "Dance of the Fangfeng Clan" and the "Dance of the Ge Tian Clan".

In addition, people can hold traditional festivals, such as offering sacrifices to the heavens, and singing and dancing to show respect and prayer for the gods. Its dance posture is characterized by solemnity, mainly manifested in reverence for the gods (Dong, 2020, p. 89). Mysterious symbols are a common expression in Chinese folk dance. Dancers use special moves and accessories to create a mysterious and beautiful atmosphere. Traditional instruments, like the erhu, xiao, gong and drum, often accompany these dances, vividly reflecting cultural symbols and enhancing the audience's sense of cultural identity. For example, the melodies of the erhu, highly esteemed in Chinese culture, are frequently used in dance performances to achieve this effect.

3.2 CULTURAL CONNOTATION

General mysticism typically focuses on exploring the relationship between the soul and God, whereas various mystical theories, tied to philosophical systems, elucidate the relationship between humans and nature, forming a comprehensive cosmological and ontological theory. These theories interpret the ultimate purpose of life as understanding the universe's laws and purposes. They advocate for spiritual and mental freedom, encouraging individuals to free themselves from material and spiritual enslavement, attain discernment of all things and acquire the wisdom to navigate life.

The interplay and correlation between philosophy and the “factual” nature of dance, in Chinese dance history, are evident in the early theoretical work “Le Ji”. The enduring vitality of dance and its creative connections and transformations continually emerge in modern dance creation, with some works presenting profound philosophical thoughts. For instance, at the Shanghai International Art Festival, choreographer Shen Wei's creation “Rong” drew on the wisdom of the Chinese *Book of Changes* to extract concepts of the mind and body, life and the universe, emphasizing the interconnectedness and spirituality of all things. This combination of devices, imagery and dance provides contemporary dance with a profound reflection on humanity's present and future destiny (Parks, 2001, p. 112).

Folk dance often combines religious philosophy and mystical elements to express reverence for the gods. It also has extraordinary properties. These dances provide participants with spiritual sustenance beyond reality and help them cope with the stresses and worries of daily life. However, when engaging in folk dances, they can temporarily set aside their worries and immerse themselves in the enchanting world of dance, finding inner peace and satisfaction (Ramiz, 2020, p. 918). Overall, understanding the religious philosophy and mystical elements in Chinese folk dance provides deep insights into various ethnic groups' cultural and spiritual heritage, highlighting their unique traditions and evolving artistic expressions (Ghosh *et al.*, 2020, p. 52).

3.3 SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE AND CONNECTION IN ACTUAL FEATURES

The Chinese spirit is the soul of the nation's long-term survival. Folk dances demonstrate this spirit by expressing the reverence and worship of heaven and earth, life and gods. Common activities, such as worship to heaven and worship to God in dance, express faith and respect to God through body movements, dance steps and music. In addition, folk dance also evokes people's inner spirit and wisdom through mysterious elements, reflecting the harmonious relationship between man and nature and the universe.

Chinese folk dance is usually associated with religious ceremonies and celebrations. In many religious ceremonies and festivals, people express their respect by dancing, worshipping gods and praying for the heaven's blessings. They are often accompanied by special dance movements and music related to religious ceremonies and festivals, which carry people's pursuit of divinity and demonstrate their faith in divinity (Tanaka, 2018, p. 49).

The stories and character images, commonly described in Chinese folk dance, are related to myths and legends, and they express a mysterious experience beyond reality through body posture and dance one. Dancers demonstrate their communication and interaction with mysterious forces in the form of dance.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the harmony between humans and nature, as well as between humans and all things in heaven and earth. Folk dance often shows reverence for nature and a sense of awe for all things in the world. This dance shows respect for the nature's power and care for the world's nature's balance, and highlights the interdependence and mutual influence between man and nature.

The religious philosophy and mysterious factors, contained in Chinese folk dance, are also human exploration and pursuit of spiritual realm. Through dance, people can transcend their material desires and achieve a state of transcendence from reality. "Such dance experiences can evoke a sense of life, thereby stimulating inner spirit and wisdom" (Tursunovna; Munisxon, 2021, p. 13).

In short, Chinese folk dance is closely related to factors, such as religion and metaphysics. Metaphysics refers to the study of the world's essence, that is, the study of all beings, the causes and origins of all phenomena (especially abstract concepts). Originally constructed by Aristotle, it is referred to as the "First Philosophy" and "First Science". Overall, Chinese folk dance has religious philosophy and mystical elements, giving it a profound spiritual connotation. They express their reverence for God in the form of dance, their pursuit of transcendence from reality, and the harmony between humans and nature, as well as between humans and the universe. These factors make Chinese folk dance richer in content and in spirit (Doménech *et al.*, 2019, p. 1653).

4 SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM ELEMENTS IN CHINESE FOLK DANCE

Chinese folk dance blends traditional religious philosophy and mysticism, reflecting deep thoughts on the universe, life and spirituality. Studying it enhances appreciation and protection of Chinese culture, aiding cultural preservation, research and innovation.

Historically, Chinese ethnic folk dance has evolved from various ethnic groups' unique backgrounds and practices. - Integrating religious philosophy and mysticism enriches its content and form while preserving cultural essence. This involves maintaining traditional dance characteristics and emphasizing distinct ethnic traits, ensuring accessibility and relevance.

For innovation, ethnic folk dance must evolve by blending traditional essence with contemporary influences, promoting diversified development. Education and promotion are crucial, fostering an environment that encourages the exploration and practice of ethnic folk dance. This dual focus ensures its continuation and relevance, enhancing understanding and appreciation of this rich heritage. These strategies not only preserve and rejuvenate Chinese folk dance, but also underscore its significance as a repository of cultural identity and historical continuity, reflecting the profound spiritual and philosophical depths of Chinese civilization.

4.1 CULTURAL PROTECTION AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

Analyzing the religious philosophy and mysterious factors, contained in Chinese folk dance, is of great significance for inheritance and preservation. Integrating religious philosophy and mysticism into Chinese folk dance can contribute to the protection of cultural heritage. For example, the most typical mask dance in Han paintings is the Nuo dance. In primitive times, people had already used animal skins to disguise themselves for hunting. Masked masks were beneficial for sudden attacks and could reduce sacrifice. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, this kind of singing and dancing, with a ferocious beast shaped mask, was usually performed, during the "Nuo Festival", to drive away ghosts and epidemics.

In addition, the patterns on the painted coffin of the Han Dynasty Tomb No. 1, in Mawangdui, also include the dance of the twelve divine beasts, which are vivid and dynamic. These images provide valuable visual materials for modern people to study Nuo dance. The most important kind of folk art, which has both religious philosophy and mystery, is an indispensable part of Chinese national culture. Its analysis can help to deeply understand its connotation and characteristics, and, then, effectively protect and inherit it to prevent its passage in history.

By analyzing the religious philosophy and mysterious factors, contained in Chinese folk dance, the understanding of folk dance can be deepened. Religious philosophy and mysticism are the main directions for the development of human thinking, playing an important guiding role in people's understanding of the world and exploring the life's meaning. The religious philosophy and mystery, expressed in Chinese folk dance, are a profound reflection and understanding by the Chinese people of the relationship between life and the universe, as well as between humans and nature. On this basis, religion and mysticism can be more deeply understood, so as to explore the wisdom and philosophy contained therein, which is of great significance to the study of religion and philosophy, and the promotion of human civilization (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2020, p. 525).

Both dance and religion belong to the social formations of the upper social structure, although relatively independent, but interrelated. Through the analysis, it can be concluded that dance and religion exist independently. Without religious ceremonies, people can still dance. Religion can exist without dance. However, the need for dance support, in the process of religious development, indicates that dance promotes the development and spread of religion.

4.2 INTEGRATION OF CULTURAL INNOVATION AND ART DEVELOPMENT

An in-depth exploration of the religious philosophy and mystery, contained in Chinese folk dance, is of great significance for promoting cultural exchange and interdisciplinary integration (Astapov, 2019, p. 1). This also promotes the mutual learning and reference among disciplines, and provides new ideas for the research of folk dance theory. The exploration of religious philosophy and mysterious factors is instructive to the creation of modern dance. Conducting in-depth research on the religious philosophy and mystery, contained in Chinese folk dance, is conducive to promoting the innovation of national culture and the development of art (Zheng, 2018, p. 118). Combining these factors, we can create unique dance music, enrich the artistic language and expression of modern dance, promote the innovation and development of dance art, and open up new roads and directions.

Integrating religious philosophy and mysticism into Chinese ethnic folk dance preserves traditional cultural values while promoting interdisciplinary exchange, artistic collaboration and the evolution of dance forms. This fusion enhances expressive power and cultural depth. Interdisciplinary exchange involves collaboration among scholars in humanities, social sciences and arts, enriching understanding across fields, like anthropology, philosophy and art history. This leads to a deeper appreciation of the symbols and motifs in folk dances.

Artistic collaboration allows choreographers and dancers to reinterpret traditional narratives in contemporary contexts. By merging folk dance with modern dance, multimedia arts and virtual reality, innovative performance styles emerge, revitalizing traditional dances and reaching a broader audience.

Furthermore, the exploration of religious philosophy and mysticism in dance paves the way for the evolution of dance forms. By delving into these complex themes, dancers and choreographers can create works that are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also rich in spiritual and intellectual depth. This approach can transform folk dance from a mere cultural exhibition to a dynamic medium of personal and communal expression, reflecting contemporary issues and spiritual quests.

The fusion of religious philosophy and mysticism with Chinese ethnic folk dance preserves cultural heritage and resonates with modern audiences. It enhances dance as a conduit for interdisciplinary research and global cultural dialogue. This dynamic interplay, between tradition and innovation, ensures the continued relevance and vitality of Chinese folk dance in contemporary art.

CONCLUSIONS

Identifying and understanding an ethnic group's unique characteristics through aspects of folk dance — such as movements, stylistic rhythms, musical melodies, and the use of clothing and props — underscore the profound meaning embedded within these cultural expressions. Each ethnic group narrates its own story through folk dance, thereby transforming it into a vibrant emblem of national culture and a significant cultural symbol. This perspective is increasingly recognized within the academic community, highlighting the fact that folk dance is far from being “meaningless” or merely “limited to the dance itself without expressing anything”.

Folk dance, rich in meaning, has unique strengths distinct from other art forms. When analyzing it, focus on the relationships between its interpretive meanings, rather than seeking clear references. Though folk dance subjects may seem vague, their interpretive content can offer profound insights, as seen in many contemporary dance works, where expression and meaning often transcend subject clarity.

Historically, mysticism has seamlessly intertwined with art, exemplified by tarot cards, which embody artistic elements infused with mystical significance. In times of uncertainty, people have historically turned to such mystical or supernatural elements for guidance. This notion aligns with Wassily Kandinsky's portrayal of art as a “spiritual life,” where art serves as a source of strength, empowering individuals through challenging times

and aiding in the pursuit of self-awareness. Thus, both art and mysticism provide a pivotal means for personal and collective expression and exploration.

Integrating religious philosophy and mysticism into Chinese folk dance is crucial for preserving cultural heritage and reflecting continuity and evolution of the Chinese civilization. Taoism, Buddhism and local religions imbue these dances with deep meaning, bridging the past and present, and making the art form both entertaining and educational.

Taoist principles of balance and harmony are vividly illustrated through symmetrical choreography and fluid movements that represent the natural flow of Qi, making the dance a living expression of Taoist thought. Buddhist themes of suffering, impermanence and enlightenment are explored through movements and symbols like the lotus flower, which signifies purity and spiritual awakening, transforming the dance into a vehicle for conveying profound spiritual truths.

Moreover, the ritualistic aspects of these dances often incorporate elements of shamanistic practices and ancestor worship, particularly during festivals and ceremonies. Costumes, masks and props are utilized to visually represent mystical and spiritual entities, connecting the community with the divine and reinforcing the role of dances in spiritual and communal life.

The Lion Dance exemplifies how these religious and mystical themes are woven into choreography, symbolizing good luck and the dispelling of evil through its dynamic movements and symbolic overcoming of obstacles. This highlights how folk dance serves not only as an art form, but also as a cultural repository that preserves and transmits philosophical and spiritual knowledge across generations. The fusion of religious philosophy and mysticism with Chinese folk dance underscores its significance in the living tradition of Chinese culture. It demonstrates how dance not only mirrors societal beliefs and spiritual practices, but also acts as a dynamic medium for expressing and perpetuating these elements. This integration is crucial for the development of Chinese cultural identity and offers valuable insights into how traditional art forms can enhance national cultural soft power and contribute to cultural preservation and education.

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