

The Aesthetic Connotations and Contemporary Inheritance of Tujia Folk Dance “Gunlong Lianxiang”

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Abstract: “Gunlong Lianxiang” is a unique form of folk dance among the Tujia people in Xuan’en County, Hubei Province, named after its characteristic “rolling” movement. Local folk artists have skillfully integrated traditional Lianxiang, Lianhualuo, and singing, while incorporating elements of local acrobatics and martial arts from regional opera, thereby creating a new genre of Lianxiang. This paper first explores the aesthetic connotations of Tujia folk dance “Gunlong Lianxiang” from the perspectives of movement and spirit, and then analyzes its characteristics of inheritance in the new era. The aim is to clarify the intrinsic features of “Gunlong Lianxiang” and to summarize valuable experiences for its future development.

Keywords: “Gunlong Lianxiang”; Aesthetic Connotations; Contemporary Inheritance; Tujia Folk Dance

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1. Introduction

“Lianxiang” is a folk dance in which performers use a stick-like prop to strike various parts of their bodies while dancing. The props used by performers are generally the same across China: bamboo sticks about one meter in length, with both ends tied with colorful ribbons, predominantly red and yellow, and adorned with small coins and ornaments that produce sound when struck. The lively and interesting performance, accompanied by rhythmic sounds, has made this dance popular among the general public, and it carries certain historical significance. In Hubei Province, 55 regions have variations of “Lianxiang Dance,” with the most famous being “Gunlong Lianxiang” in Lijiahe Township, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, western Hubei, which was included in the Hubei Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2009.

2. Aesthetic Connotations of the Tujia Folk Dance “Gunlong Lianxiang”

2.1 Aesthetic Connotations at the Level of Movement

The essence of “Gunlong Lianxiang” lies in the “rolling” (gun) movement. Folk artists have combined movements from traditional Lianxiang, such as “Lotus Covers the Head,” “Ancient Tree Coils its Roots,” “Yellow Dragon Twines Around the Waist,” and “Sleeping Dragon Rolls Over,” while creatively amplifying the dynamic image of “rolling,” thereby expanding the traditional actions of Gunlong Lianxiang.

The technique of “rolling” involves performers creating various postures and movements while rolling on the ground and striking their bodies and the ground simultaneously, forming a series of dance routines. Describing the relationship between the body and the stick with the word “rolling” is particularly apt. For example, in the movement sequence “Sleeping Dragon Rolls Over,” performers use the Lianxiang stick in coordination with their feet, which spring up naturally, and then roll their upper bodies forward and backward on the ground. As their bodies follow the rhythm, they alternately incline and arch, maintaining balance. When turning left, the right hand rolls the tail and head of the stick, tapping the knees with each beat while the Lianxiang strikes the legs, and the left hand taps the rhythm in sync with the body’s movement. Afterward, the upper body rolls to a seated upright position, with the right

hand lifting the wrist and using the rolling motion of the stick to strike the inner and outer upper arms as well as the elbow joints. Performers must remain relaxed as they roll on the ground, and at the climax of the performance, the speed increases from slow to fast, making it appear as if the Lianxiang stick, like a dragon, dances along with the performer. The dynamic image of the “dragon” is vividly portrayed through the rapid winding and rolling movements of the upper body.

2.2 Aesthetic Connotations at the Spiritual Level

The image of the dragon in “Gunlong Lianxiang” is not only a symbol of the Chinese nation but also an embodiment of the nation’s spiritual strength and the essence of the dance’s heritage.

Furthermore, the props used in “Gunlong Lianxiang” carry significant meaning. The Lianxiang stick is approximately one meter long, with both ends, the head and tail, hollowed out. There are two holes at each end, aligned perpendicularly, totaling four holes, symbolizing the four cardinal directions (east, south, west, and north). Inside each hole are three pairs of copper coins, a total of 24 coins, representing the 24 solar terms of the year. The ends and middle of the stick are adorned with red and yellow ribbons; the red symbolizes a happy and prosperous life, while the yellow represents the majesty of the dragon. The red and yellow color scheme, full of celebratory meaning, represents the 365 days of the year, ensuring smooth journeys and good fortune throughout the seasons.

It is evident that the image of the “dragon” in “Gunlong Lianxiang” holds a sacred and auspicious place in the hearts of the people, bringing them positive energy and authority to overcome difficulties. The dance is named “Gunlong Lianxiang” due to its extensive imitation of dragon movements and pursuit of the dragon’s spirit, developing into a unique form of dance.

3. Contemporary Inheritance of the Tujia Folk Dance “Gunlong Lianxiang”

3.1 Development Through Community Involvement

In the modern ecological environment, the folk belief in “Lianxiang” has gradually faded, though the internal psychological aspirations it represented persist. “Gunlong Lianxiang,” which integrates singing, drumming, dancing, and rolling, has now become part of the curriculum for physical education and recess activities in many primary and secondary schools in the mountainous areas of western Hubei. Variations of “Gunlong Lianxiang,” such as rural, stage, square dance, and school versions, have been continually innovated and widely disseminated in the Tujia and Miao villages, becoming a form of folk art deeply rooted in the daily lives of the people.

Mr. Zhou Shuting has trained six disciples, who have successively formed an elderly arts troupe, established training institutions, integrated the original movements, and documented and passed them down in written form. They have spearheaded the popularization of “Gunlong Lianxiang” among the general population. These leaders, along with veteran artists, now serve as the main force behind the inheritance of “Gunlong Lianxiang”.

After a decade of development, there are now 41 people proficient in “Gunlong Lianxiang.” In 2006, fewer than 200 people practiced Lianxiang; today, over 6,000 people engage in Lianxiang performances, with more than 20 villages having their own Lianxiang teams.

3.2 Development through Integration into the Classroom

As the “Gunlong Lianxiang” community has expanded, the dance has now been introduced into the classrooms of primary schools and kindergartens. In 2011, the Dance Department of Wuhan Conservatory of Music invited Mr. Hou Anxing to give lessons. He not only taught the techniques, styles, and performance attributes of “Gunlong Lianxiang,” but also provided significant technical guidance in compiling the core teaching materials for the course.

From its original folk form, “Gunlong Lianxiang” has entered classrooms and become part of the professional construction of Hubei folk dance studies, achieving three major breakthroughs in its inheritance:

First, it involved the dissection of the basic movements of the original “Gunlong Lianxiang” and the implementation of standardized and singular training. “Gunlong Lianxiang” features body movements derived from striking various body parts, with the bending and trembling of the knees forming the dynamic rhythm. Simultaneously, the arms swing naturally with the strikes, and the continuous trembling of the knees transitions from slow to fast, with elastic trembling and lateral swaying. The shifting of the body’s center of gravity drives the relaxed movements of the upper limbs, and the knees remain loose throughout, highlighting the dance’s characteristics of relaxation and fluidity.

Second, there was a breakthrough in the rhythm techniques. The rhythm techniques of old performers were often spontaneous and flexible, producing rhythms of four, six, ten, or even eighteen beats. In the classroom, the techniques were refined with an eight-beat pattern (eight strikes) as the standard: striking once per beat, twice per beat, or using diverse rhythms such as two slow beats followed by three fast beats, or three fast beats followed by two slow beats. Although the rhythms differ, the movement of the lower body is

often the core element that defines the style, which in turn influences the changes in movement rhythm, speed, and intensity, resulting in various dance dynamics.

Third, through video viewing and teacher explanations, students are encouraged to understand the origins of the movements and expand their imaginations, restoring the original essence of “Gunlong Lianxiang” through art classes. For example, the lowering of the center of gravity, knee flexion and extension, and relaxed shoulders are believed by experts to have originated from the self-adjustments of laborers to reduce physical strain, embodying a highly artistic creation. From a dance perspective, this posture possesses a unique beauty, representing the aesthetic appeal of the human body shaped by labor. This serves as an inspiration for students to master the fundamental postures of “Gunlong Lianxiang” and understand the close relationship between its movements, folk customs, and labor life.

3.3 Development in Artistic Performances

The performance forms of “Gunlong Lianxiang” can be divided into three types: solo, duo, and group dances, with group dances being the main form of contemporary “Gunlong Lianxiang” performances. Group dances are further divided into on-stage and off-stage performances. On-stage performances have adopted elements of stage art, including lighting, stage design, costumes, music, and choreography, and have innovated in terms of participant levels and platforms. To cater to the audience’s aesthetic preferences, the choreography emphasizes the order and rhythm of movements, amplifying actions such as squatting, twisting, jumping, trembling, kicking, and leaping. The movements are restructured and the dance forms are reimagined, creating a modern version of “Gunlong Lianxiang” that, while rooted in ethnic culture, is accessible and appealing to contemporary audiences.

Professional dancers have refined the basic routines of “Gunlong Lianxiang,” skillfully combining strong elements of performance, narrative, and technical virtuosity to create dance compositions and productions presented on the stages of major competitions and gala performances. For example, Wuhan Conservatory of Music instructor Liu Yaqing choreographed Lotus Xiang Celebrates Spring, a dance production divided into four sections: Celebrating Spring, Admiration, Love, and Spring Passion. The work depicts a touching love story in which young Tujia men and women use Lianxiang to express affection, seeking their ideal partner during the celebration of spring. The piece refines, modifies, and innovates upon the original movements, with choreography that highlights the unique dynamic of the Tujia dance, characterized by slight knee flexion, turning, and relaxed knee trembling, through male-female duets, lifts, partnering, and striking techniques.

I had the privilege of participating in Lotus Xiang Celebrates Spring and experienced each movement firsthand. While respecting the fundamental stylistic characteristics of “Gunlong Lianxiang,” I contributed to the bold innovation of the Lianxiang movements and routines. These movements, while developing toward a more artistic direction, remain closely linked to the original form. For instance, in the creative interpretation of the “Flood Dragon Enters the Water” sequence in Lotus Xiang Celebrates Spring, I choreographed movements centered around the dynamic image and core elements of “rolling,” bringing it to life both in physical form and in spirit. In mythology, the flood dragon is the ruler of the underwater world (the Dragon King), a symbol of good fortune in folk traditions, and the embodiment of imperial rule in ancient times. Its image on stage must exude authority. Therefore, I sought to magnify the traditional movements of veteran performers in the first four beats of the dragon’s entrance. I then mimicked the movement trajectory of the dragon entering the water, repeating the sequence twice, with each first beat involving a stepping motion that engaged the head, blending points and lines as if the flood dragon were first pretending to dive into the water, then quickly emerging with a powerful gesture to assert its dominance, before diving again. This performance style brings the flood dragon to life on stage and highlights the creative dynamic expression of “rolling.”

4. Conclusion

Due to the unique geographical location of Enshi, it is difficult for many cultural elements to spread beyond the region. Although it has largely been protected from the erosion and influence of external cultures, “Gunlong Lianxiang” still faces the challenge of a shortage of successors in terms of intangible cultural heritage preservation. As a beneficiary of intangible cultural heritage, I believe that young dancers should participate more in field research and learning, integrating their knowledge with the development of folk dance. This approach will help promote the better preservation and transmission of the intangible cultural heritage of “Gunlong Lianxiang.”

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