

Choreographic Flexibility in the Invention of Chinese Classical Sleeve Dance from 1949 to 2022

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the invention and development of Chinese classical sleeve dance from 1949 to 2022 and explores its intricate relationship with the multiple transformations within Chinese society, politics, and culture. This historical context is rooted in the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when the government initiated cultural policies to revive traditional culture. The late 1970s was a crucial turning point as China implemented economic reform policies and rekindled connections with Western nations. This provided an environment in which dance practitioners began to invent various forms of sleeve dance. However, after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, a significant change occurred in the aesthetic expression of sleeve dance. It increasingly emphasized the use of traditional Chinese cultural elements while reducing the integration of Western culture. This study focuses on three periods of China's socio-political and cultural transformation: 1949 to 1978, 1978 to 2001, and 2001 to 2022. By focusing on the Shenyun sleeve dance, this study explores how it was reinvented, and by employing qualitative methods, strategies for understanding the invented choreography of the Shenyun sleeve dance across different stages of Chinese socialism will be revealed.

Keywords: Chinese classical sleeve dance, cultural invention, invented tradition, choreographic flexibility, national cultural policy

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Introduction

Sleeve dance is a traditional dance that prevailed in ancient Chinese courts, from the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC-256 BC) to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). As documented in a history book on the Zhou Dynasty, when sleeve dance originated and gained popularity “dancers d[id] not use props in their hands but only wave[d] their sleeves to complete the performance” (Ruan 793). During the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), sleeve dance was supported by rulers, and it became an important part of the sacrificial activities of the court. This was due to the rulers’ belief that the sleeves built a bridge between humans and Gods, and that sleeve dance was a way of communicating with the gods. Consequently, sleeve dance became indispensable to significant religious rituals. It was also widely popular in court entertainment and formal banquets. Many historical texts demonstrate that queens, concubines, and dancers were adept at sleeve dance in the court of the Han Dynasty (Ge Hong 2; Fan Ye 594; Ban Gu 2757). As a result, sleeve dance developed various forms (e.g., Tong sleeve, Die sleeve and Bo sleeve), which enriched its expression and aesthetic connotation.

In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), sleeve dance underwent further evolution such as the use of wide and spliced sleeves, an influence from the Han Dynasty. Although the form changed, the technique and performance of sleeve dance remained consistent. As a result, sleeve dance in the Tang dynasty became famous for its splendor and diversity, which further solidified its position in the traditional dance repertoire of imperial court performances. However, after the Song Dynasty, the popularity of Chinese opera led to the decline of traditional dance, including sleeve dance. This stripped sleeve dance of its distinction as an art form until the middle of the 20th century.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. This landmark event marked a profound transformation in China’s political structure and social fabric, heralding the onset of the socialist era in the country. In order to promote and develop Chinese socialist culture,¹ the Chinese government introduced a new national cultural policy. In this context, dance practitioners began to establish Chinese classical dance as a formal field of study in the 1950s, intending to incorporate it into their plan to revive Chinese traditional culture.

Subsequently, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated a new era of reform and opening up in China² and introduced economic reform policies to promote the country's economic growth. The economic exchange between China and other countries facilitated cultural interactions, resulting in the influx of Western culture to China. The implementation of these policies and the interaction between economy and culture significantly influenced the development of Chinese arts, including the field of Chinese classical dance. Dance practitioners were eager to invent dances representing the-nation and promoting traditional Chinese culture.

In 2001, China formally became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), initiating a more open and internationally oriented trade policy.³ In the wake of increasing cultural globalization, tensions between traditional culture and modernization became progressively evident. This period witnessed changes and adjustments in the field of traditional dance. In contrast to the late 20th century, Chinese classical dance practitioners in the 21st century focused more on integrating Chinese traditional cultural elements into the choreography of sleeve dance, while reducing the references to foreign cultural elements. This strategy is designed to ensure the continued preservation and transmission of the Chinese traditional cultural identity and characteristics in the context of cultural globalization.

This study speculates that the strategy⁴ of flexible invention in sleeve dance was influenced by top-down socio-political and economic forces in China, especially since 1978, when modernization efforts began. The growing tension between traditional culture and modernity in this social environment raised a significant question: In the process of modernization and globalization, how can dance practitioners flexibly “invent” sleeve dance to respond to its ever-changing Chinese context?

In order to address this question, this study draws lessons from Eric Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition. Hobsbawm defines the invention of tradition as the conscious design and promotion of certain rituals, symbols or practices to give the impression of a natural inheritance from past traditions, thereby serving specific social, political, or cultural purposes (Hobsbawm 2). Hobsbawm's perspective provides a framework for the analysis of the invention of classical sleeve dance in the context of socialist China. This study demonstrates how the national government and cultural institutions utilized sleeve dance as a cultural tool to attain their social, political, and cultural objectives.

In addition to the invention of tradition, this study also turns to Yatin Lin's concept of flexibility, formulated in examining the choreography of traditional dance in Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theater from 1973 to 2003, reflecting Taiwan's ever-changing cultural identity. According to Lin, flexibility emphasizes the ability of cultural practitioners to develop new strategies to deal with the challenges in Taiwan's changing social environment and cultural identity. Lin's perspective provides a framework for analyzing the flexibility of classical sleeve dance, which was driven by China's new political ideology. The strategy adopted by dance practitioners in Chinese classical sleeve dance appears to be closely related to the reform of Chinese society, aiming to ensure that traditional dance maintains its unique cultural vitality and significance while adapting to the new environment.

Thus, this study draws on the concept of invented tradition proposed by Hobsbawm and the concept of choreographic flexibility introduced by Lin to explore the strategies adopted by dance practitioners in inventing sleeve dance. This study suggests that this flexible invention strategy not only reflects a potential political will for the development of Chinese national culture but also aims to balance tradition and modernity, as well as local and international influences. To narrow down the research scope, the researchers selected for analysis a particular sleeve dance—the Shenyun sleeve dance.⁵ This dance form, the earliest and most popular type since the founding of the People's Republic of China, has been developed and passed down as an independent traditional dance form. By exploring how dance practitioners reinvent sleeve dance with flexibility, this study will show how their strategies are responses to the changing socio-political and economic landscape in China.

Studies on Chinese Sleeve Dance

Sleeve dance has a history of more than 3000 years in China. Ancient Chinese literary sources and cultural relics show that sleeve dance was prevalent in the palaces of the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC), the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and the Song Dynasty (960-1279). However, according to the *History of Chinese Dance*, edited by Wang Kefen, traditional dance, including sleeve dance, disappeared after the Song Dynasty due to social changes and the rising popularity of traditional opera. Chinese classical dance practitioners also

had no existing dance historical dance records and resources to invent and develop classical sleeve dance.

Since 1949, the Chinese government has implemented a cultural policy to revive and develop traditional dance. In the 1980s, dance practitioners responded to these policies by inventing the Shenyun sleeve dance and disseminating it within national educational institutions and through Chinese official media, thereby establishing it as an independent national dance.

Extensive academic study on the development of Shenyun Sleeve Dance within the Chinese context dates to the 1990s. Early studies primarily centered around Shao Weiqu's (1999) investigation of the curriculum content related to sleeve dance in higher education institutions. At the turn of the century, scholars extended their investigations into various facets of sleeve dance. Chinese dance scholar Ren Xiaolu (2012) discussed the training methods of Chinese classical sleeve dance. Another scholar, Sun Jiahui (2014), explored the contemporary landscape of sleeve dance development and the creative processes involved in sleeve dance performances. Miao Xinyu (2016) also analyzed the performance characteristics of water sleeves, highlighting their aesthetic elements, distinctive styles, movements, and intricate techniques. Meanwhile, Ju Shishi (2018) focused on the intricacies of sleeve costumes and techniques in her master's thesis, while dance scholar Deng Wanlu (2018) delved into the practical application and innovation of sleeve dance movements within teaching contexts. In her doctoral dissertation, Zhu Min (2017) discussed the use and application of the sleeve in contemporary training and performance. In addition, in her book *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*, Asian studies scholar Emily Wilcox (2019) briefly recounted her experience of participating in the Shenyun sleeve dance class at the Beijing Dance Academy. Collectively, these studies have provided valuable insights into Shenyun sleeve dance and enriched the understanding of its development.

However, it is worth noting that some scholars, such as Sun (2014), Miao (2016), and Ju (2018), have provided relatively brief descriptions of sleeve dance costumes and movements or have primarily focused on the development of university curricula related to this dance form. While valuable, these studies have yet to thoroughly discuss strategies and methods by which dance practitioners flexibly invent sleeve dance. This study focuses primarily on analyzing the flexibility in the invention

process of the Shenyun sleeve dance, particularly in response to evolving national objectives. By doing so, this study underscores the transformative characteristics of this dance form throughout its evolution.

Furthermore, this study presents a review of the literature on the nexus of Chinese nationalism and traditional dance. As Reed (1998) observes, “dance is a powerful tool in shaping nationalist ideology and in the creation of national subjects, often more so than political rhetoric or intellectual debates” (511). In a similar vein, Wilcox (2011) presents an ethnographic study of dance training and performance in China’s national educational institutions. Her study examines how dance practitioners gradually establish and strengthen national identity through systematic dance training. Meanwhile, Huang Noah Evan (2021), writing on Chinese ballet during the Cultural Revolution, shows that the movement forms and styles of this dance were consistent with the ideas espoused by Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and were also reflected in its choreographic practice.

Similar cases of dance invention and institutionalization shaped by political ideologies and national policies can be found in other countries. For example, Ha Sangwoo (2015) examines the invention and evolution of the Korean Mask Dance (T’alch’um), and how it reflects the shifting social and political dynamics of South Korea in the 1960s to 1980s. According to Ha, the Korean government played an important role in this process, resulting in the mask dance form being further developed in the higher education system and used as a means to negotiate and express national identity. Similarly, AMK Stapleton (2001) explains that the Scottish dance form reflects and sustains the development of Scottish national identity and further reveals that social and cultural forces shape and influence the development of Scottish dance.

The above studies demonstrate how dance as a cultural practice promotes and reflects national identity across diverse social and political contexts. The studies indicate that dance practices are significantly shaped by specific social, economic, and political environments, often serving as potent political tools within nationalist projects. Through the enhancement of national identity, the dissemination of political ideology and the expression of dissent, dance shows its unique capacity to drive social change. Although China and other countries have different historical backgrounds and national characteristics, traditional dance in various contexts

has been similarly employed to reinforce nationalism, whether through state-led institutionalization, political messaging, or cultural revival efforts.

However, there is still a lack of in-depth discussion on the role and impact of the ever-changing Chinese society and its policies in shaping traditional dance forms. In examining the invention of classical sleeve dance and the complex relationship between Chinese social, political, and cultural forces, this study will also further explore how nationalist discourse affects and shapes Chinese classical sleeve dance.

Methodology

This case study adopts an ethnographic approach, utilizing qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, auto-ethnography, and analysis of government documents and reports to collect data. Six participants representing different professional fields were interviewed. The participants included four university dance teachers, a professor specializing in aesthetics and art education, and an employee of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. Their diverse backgrounds and experiences provided rich and multifaceted data. Specifically, the dance teachers shared their knowledge and experiences related to sleeve dance. The professor provided insights on the development of traditional cultural education in China, while the government employee discussed the Chinese government's initiatives to manage and promote traditional culture.

The study also involved observation, focusing on the Shenyun sleeve dance classes conducted in Chinese university settings. This observation provided visual material to support the analytical framework and offer a deeper understanding of the content and practical application of sleeve dance within higher education.

Moreover, this study's ethnographic method, allowed researchers to engage directly in the practice and performance of sleeve dance, thereby allowing the collection of authentic and comprehensive data. Ethnography did not only provide a comprehensive understanding of the invention of sleeve dance, but also reduced the risk of over-interpreting or misunderstanding by incorporating first-hand observations and practitioners' perspectives, rather than relying solely on textual sources or second-hand accounts. Through continuous engagement with the dance community, this approach ensures that the interpretations remain grounded in lived experiences and cultural contexts.

Finally, textual sources, including Chinese cultural policies, policy documents, and publications from national institutions were also analyzed. These documents provided essential background information for understanding the socio-political landscape in China and the overarching cultural policies that set the stage for this study. The combination of these research methods enabled the researchers to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the development and transformations of Shenyun sleeve dance, while connecting it to China's socio-political milieu.

Theoretical Grounding

The theoretical framework combines two theories: Hobsbawm's "invented tradition" and Lin's choreographic flexibility. Because these theories have overlapping points, they were effectively implemented in the analysis, as presented below:

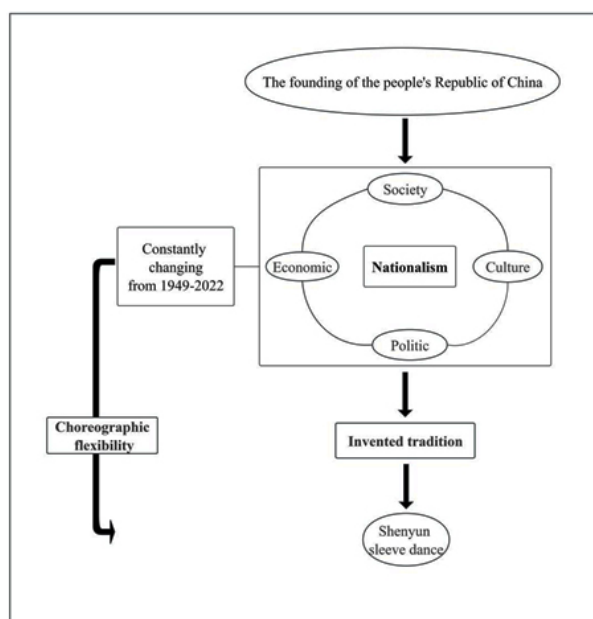


Fig. 1. A Theoretical Framework Consisting of Two Concepts. 12 Dec. 2023. Authors' Drawing.

According to Hobsbawm, "Traditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" (1). Traditional inventions occur more frequently, especially "when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns" (4). He points out that "one specific interest of 'invented

traditions'...[is that] they are highly relevant to the comparatively recent historical innovation, the 'nation' with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest" (13). He further explains that "existing customary traditional practices - folksong, physical contests, marksmanship - were modified, ritualized and institutionalized for the new national purposes" (6). From Hobsbawm's perspective, the invention of tradition frequently occurs during periods of rapid social transformation, as governments, cultural institutions and political elites seek to cope with new social challenges and construct a sense of historical continuity. He also emphasizes that the invention of tradition is closely related to nationalism and national symbols. Through the process of formalization and ritualization, old practices and customs are adapted to serve new national purposes.

In line with Hobsbawm's perspective, the Shenyun sleeve dance is an invented tradition. While sleeve dance traces its origins back more than 3,000 years in China, its contemporary form has been shaped and systematized by Chinese dance practitioners in the modern era. To date, the integration of sleeve dance into the curricula of national educational institutions and its promotion by Chinese state media have shaped classical sleeve dance as a symbol of national culture and a medium for promoting specific ideologies to serve Chinese society. In this regard, the theory of invented tradition is useful in understanding the emergence of the Shenyun sleeve dance.

Lin's (2010) concept of choreographic flexibility, on the other hand, explains how dance practitioners employ flexible choreographic strategies amidst the ever-changing socio-political, economic, and cultural environment. Lin uses the concept of choreographic flexibility to discuss the relationship between the repertoire of Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theater and Taiwan's identity politics. She explores how traditional dance reflects and responds to Taiwan's changing social context and how it serves as a means of communication and expression:

Cloud Gate's dancers have formed their own unique bodily aesthetics based on the long term hybrid training of ballet, Western modern dance techniques, Chinese martial arts and Hsiun's brand of taichi daoyin. Such versatility and multiple waves of influences from within Taiwan and abroad reflect the cultural flexibility of Taiwan on a choreographically grounded level. (252)

According to Lin, Taiwan's complex social and political background influenced the development and construction of traditional culture, which is evident in the choreography of traditional Taiwanese dance. This strategy—designed to serve the purposes of nation-building and nationalism—is a coping mechanism for navigating a complex and evolving cultural identity.

Although China never experienced colonization in the same way Taiwan did, dance practitioners in mainland China have demonstrated similar flexibility in their choreography of traditional dance. In response to the evolving social, political, and cultural context, dance practitioners flexibly integrate various elements into the choreography of Shenyun sleeve dance, ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary times.

In sum, despite the differences in Hobsbawm's and Lin's contexts, there are important similarities in their investigation of the relationship between social development and traditional culture. Both scholars emphasize that traditional culture can be redefined and continuously developed in specific social contexts to reflect contemporary purposes and concerns. Thus, these two theories can effectively support and complement each other in studying cultural texts and practices.

Shenyun Sleeve Dance as Invented Tradition

In examining the invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance within the socio-political context of China, it is necessary to look at the background, process, and transformation of this dance form and understand the unique characteristics and inherent patterns of development in the evolution of Chinese social structures. The following sections of analysis will focus on three distinct periods: 1) the early stage of socialist construction in China (1949-1978), 2) the era of national rejuvenation and reform (1978-2001), and 3) the era of globalization (2001-2022). The analysis will show how flexible strategies employed in the invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance align with the socio-political context and cultural policies of China.

Early Stage of Socialist Construction in China: The Establishment of Chinese Classical Dance (1949-1978)

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked the beginning of the socialist era under the leadership of Mao Zedong. After a long period of war

and turmoil, China underwent extensive reforms in social, political, economic, and cultural domains. In an effort to improve its socio-economic status, China adopted a planned economy and aligned itself with the socialist bloc dominated by the Soviet Union. As political scientist Gerald Segal (1992) pointed out, the Soviet Union was not only China's closest ally in the 1950s, but also a key source of ideological and political influence in shaping the PRC's socialist model (848). China accepted and learned from the Soviet Union's model of socialist development and during this period, China not only received Soviet economic and military assistance but also engaged in cultural cooperation.

While focusing on economic development, China entered a new era of cultural construction. At the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Mao emphasized that "with the culmination of economic construction, an inevitable cultural construction climax will follow. The era when the Chinese were considered uncivilized has passed, and we will emerge as a highly cultured nation on the world stage" (Mao 345). Mao emphasized and expected cultural development in the early socialist period.

In 1951, to promote the development of socialist cultural initiatives, the Chinese Ministry of Culture issued guidelines for consolidating and strengthening national drama work. The overarching task "to strive to develop new operas, new dramas, new music, new dances, and to educate the people with revolutionary spirit and patriotism" (Guidelines for Consolidating and Strengthening National Drama Work). Meanwhile, Mao Zedong advocated the policy of "making foreign things serve China and the past serve the present" (Mao 855), emphasizing the absorption and internalization of foreign cultures as well as the inheritance and promotion of traditional culture. In addition, in cooperation with the Soviet Union, the *People's Daily* issued a slogan "encouraging Chinese artists to learn from Soviet artists" (Learn from Soviet Artists). The series of policies sparked enthusiasm among Chinese cultural workers, and the field of dance became part of this cultural fervor. In this context, dance practitioners, supported by institutions such as the Beijing Dance Academy and the Ministry of Culture, began implementing Soviet-inspired training programs and developing national dance repertoires that aligned with socialist ideology.

In order to develop traditional culture and highlight national characteristics, Ouyang Yuqian, a famous Chinese dramatist, proposed the establishment of Chinese classical dance. He encouraged dance practitioners to “base Chinese classical dance on traditional opera and separate Chinese classical dance from traditional opera” (qtd. in Li et al. 6). Ye Ning, a first-generation Chinese dancer and director of the Chinese classical dance research group, endorsed this idea. She pointed out that “dance is an essential element in traditional operas. Classical dance must become an independent art form by extracting its general principles from the traditional operas” (qtd. in Li et al. 2). There was a need for classical dance to become an independent art form by identifying general principles derived from traditional operas. In this process, dance practitioners systematically extracted stylised movements, techniques, and performance aesthetics from traditional opera and further developed them through structured training methods. For instance, one fundamental principle emphasised in this systematic approach is the fluidity and internal rhythm of trunk movements, which originates from opera performance and has been adapted to meet the expressive demands of dance. Additionally, the stylised movements in opera were deconstructed, refined, and recombined, contributing to the formation of a unique dynamic rhythm and technical training system in Chinese classical dance. Therefore, traditional operas were considered a major source in the early development of Chinese classical dance.

However, the 1950s marked a turning point in the development of Chinese classical dance, as the Soviet Ballet’s tour in China led to the integration of ballet’s structured training system—particularly in technique, choreography, and body control. As part of this cooperation, the Chinese Ministry of Culture hired Soviet dance experts to provide guidance on refining dance pedagogy and training methodologies. Under the guidance of the Soviet dance experts, dance practitioners in the field of Chinese classical dance advocated the slogan “learn from traditional operas, learn from ballet” (Li and Lv 2). This collaboration resulted in the publication of the first Chinese classical dance textbook, *Teaching Methods of Chinese Classical Dance*, in 1960. On this phenomenon, dance scholar Emily Wilcox writes:

The universalized and hegemonic character of the Western or Soviet ballet body is inseparable from political and economic power. When

the Soviet ballet body was adopted as a universal body in the Chinese dance world of the 1950s, China was politically and economically dependent on the Soviet Union. (170)

This statement reveals the influence of political and economic forces on Chinese classical dance and also highlights the weakness of Chinese dance during this period. Although the integration of traditional opera and ballet was allowed for practical reasons and other considerations of the times, this integration of classical dance forms was criticized and labeled as “rustic ballet” (土芭蕾) (Tang and Li 67).

In Premier Zhou Enlai’s 1963 speech “The Problem of Revolutionary, National and Mass Transformation of Music and Dance,” he criticized the tendency to worship foreign ideas. This speech sparked debates on the balance between adopting foreign influences and preserving national traditions in Chinese classical dance. During this period, Li Zhengyi pointed out in a symposium of the Dance Association that the problems in the construction of Chinese classical dance were the “lack of national characteristics, detachment from tradition, and the phenomenon of blind imitation of ballet” (n.p.). Faced with these challenges, the Chinese Ministry of Culture took action and invited Fang Chuanyun from the Shanghai Drama Academy to help reform Chinese classical dance. Fang demonstrated and taught how to use props such as water sleeves, knives, fans, and swords in traditional operas, and proposed to strengthen the dance’s national characteristics by adding traditional cultural elements (49-51). The sleeve dance was considered for inclusion in the reform plan of the period. However, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) interrupted the development of Chinese classical dance, and the plan to invent sleeve dance was put on hold by the political situation until 1978.

In our view, since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, a new national ideology has driven dance practitioners to engage in the practice of traditional dance, aiming to promote the development and prosperity of socialist culture. However, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, collaboration with the Soviet Union and new cultural policies led to a shift in the focus of classical Chinese dance toward the emulation of opera movements and the integration of ballet elements. Consequently, the lack of national cultural elements in Chinese classical dance during this period laid the groundwork for the emergence of sleeve dance.

The Era of National Rejuvenation and Reform: The Invention of the Shenyun Sleeve Dance (1978-2001)

The tumultuous aftermath of the Cultural Revolution prompted the second-generation leader of the Chinese Communist Party Deng Xiaoping to advocate reform and put forward the idea of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. In order to improve China's social status and promote economic growth, China held the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC⁶ Central Committee in 1978. The session focused on economic reform and building an open socialist market economy. The report of the session emphasized that "the process of opening up is a necessary condition for reform and construction. China should absorb and utilize all the advanced achievements from around the world, including developed capitalist countries, to develop socialism" (CCP National Congress). The Chinese government promoted this strategy to attract foreign investment in technology, which provided strong economic support for the nation. This period marked China's new phase of socialist modernization.

Cultural development was a primary focus of the period. In a speech at the Fourth National Congress of Chinese Literary and Art Workers in 1979, Deng Xiaoping proposed that "while building a high level of material civilization, we must raise the scientific and cultural level of the entire nation, develop a noble and rich cultural life, and construct a high level of socialist spiritual civilization" (208). This statement indicates the importance of cultural development alongside the pursuit of material civilization and economic progress. At the same time, Deng emphasized the continuation of Mao's cultural policies and guidelines:

Adhere to the policy of letting a hundred flowers blossom, promoting new things, making foreign things serve China and the past serve the present. In artistic creation, advocate the free development of different forms and styles; in art theory, promote the free discussion of different viewpoints and schools. (210)

Chinese leaders praised the core purpose of this policy not only for allowing artists to develop freely but also for reviving the lackluster cultural sphere to promote the development and prosperity of socialist culture.

With the gradual opening up of the economic and cultural spheres, the influx of foreign influences in music, dance, and painting, spurred the prevalence of liberal ideologies and fostered a trend of “Westernization” in Chinese culture. In a personal interview, Yin Zhizhong [Deputy director in the Ministry of Culture] argued that,

Western dance arts and literary trends flooded into China. The concepts and ideas of some traditional dance arts in China were opened up, allowing a broad range of artists and audiences to boldly create, draw inspiration, imitate, and even integrate Eastern and Western elements.

This statement emphasizes that the relatively stable social environment during this period provided Chinese dance practitioners with a broader perspective from which to understand the world and new ideas. The cultural climate also stimulated and promoted the formation of their modern consciousness.

In this constantly evolving cultural landscape, Chinese classical dance experienced a significant transformation. As one of the pioneers of Chinese classical dance,

Li Zhengyi points out that “after a series of reflections, Chinese classical dance entered a new historical phase, characterized by an intensified pursuit of national identity, with ‘nationality’ as its defining theme” (“Chinese Classical Dance: Where It Comes From and Where It Is Going (Part 2)” 6). It was in this period, that dance practitioners focused on the exploration of national dance and the establishment of national identity.

The invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance emerged as a notable example of the shifting milieu. Li et al. note that, “Sleeve dance is a unique, highly expressive female dance form with a rich national style in China” (91). According to them, “the organization of the sleeves reflects the pursuit of traditional culture, aesthetic aspirations, new exploration, and subjectivity construction” (6). The invention of the sleeve dance is a profound embodiment of the pursuit of national characteristics.

Subsequently, under the leadership of Shenyun pioneer Li Zhengyi, the invention of sleeve dance went through several crucial stages, with dance practitioners making sustained efforts to refine and promote it. This process is described and documented in *The History of the Teaching System of Chinese Classical Dance* by Li Zhengyi, Gao Dakun, and Zhu Qingyuan. The following is a condensed version:

During the 36th session, dance practitioners decided to organize the water sleeves. To determine the content of the sleeve dance, they sought guidance from traditional opera inheritors, including Zhao Rongchen of the Cheng School, Sun Yumin of the Xun School, and Li Yongling of the Mei School. Meanwhile, while watching the Ji Opera 'Bao Gong Pei Qing' (包公赔情), they noticed a new development in the water sleeves of the Qingyi character in the opera, with different sleeve sizes and techniques. Upon investigation, dance practitioners learned that this innovation came from Li Defu of the Xi'an Qinqiang Opera Troupe. Then, they found Li Defu and invited him to lecture at the Beijing Dance Academy. During the lecture, Li Defu performed excerpts from the opera and demonstrated how he used water sleeves to express the emotions of the characters. Following recommendations from Li Defu and Zhang Qiang, dance practitioners invited Li's student, Feng Yunying, an actress from the Shaanxi Provincial Song and Dance Theater, to organize and teach the dance sleeve material at the Beijing Dance Academy. With Zhang Qiang's assistance, they began to organize the water sleeve material based on the principles of 'practicing the body through the sleeves' (以袖带身) and 'integrating the body and the sleeves (身袖合一)'. They also adopted the suggestion of Peking Opera performer Cheng Yanqiu to integrate seven techniques of hook (勾), pick (挑), stretch (抻), punch (冲), Yang (扬), shake (甩), and dou (抖). Integrating Li Defu's specific movements and content, the organized material is basic, with three and a half feet of water sleeves and music. Dance practitioners summarized the main techniques of water sleeves in opera through ten training sequences, such as lifting sleeves, string sleeves, grasping sleeves, wearing sleeves, lowering sleeves, back sleeves, rolling sleeves, pushing sleeves, and playing sleeves, which systematically and comprehensively reflect the rules and characteristics of sleeve dance. Dance practitioners summarized the sleeve technique and pointed out that it is to transform the opera elements into dance movements, expand the range of movement, and strengthen the dance based on the original opera. This has preliminarily organized a set of foundational sleeve dance materials. After that, two semesters of training and performance were held at the Beijing Dance Academy.⁷ (119-35)

This narrative shows the four critical events of the invention: 1) That artists engaged in in-depth discussions on the invention of sleeve dance during the 36th academic session, which provided guidance to and support for the practice of sleeve dance; 2) That dance practitioners gained experience in water sleeve techniques from inheritors of traditional Chinese opera, which laid a solid foundation for the follow-up practice of sleeve dance; 3) That dance practitioners made practical innovations in sleeve forms and techniques and developed a primary curriculum that gradually standardized sleeve dance; and 4) that sleeve dance became an established part of the curriculum in national educational institutions, contributing to its recognition as an independent dance form.

It is evident that a systematic and organic process of sleeve dance invention emerged from academic discussions, observations, watching and learning from operas, and practice and innovation by dance practitioners. Based on this process, the length of the sleeves was standardized to three and a half feet, and ten training sequences for sleeve dance were organized. This standardization further highlighted the difference between the sleeves used in traditional opera and those used in Shenyun sleeve dance.

In 1983, sleeve techniques and sequences were incorporated into the curriculum of Chinese classical dance at the Beijing Dance Academy, with the establishment of the first sleeve dance teaching course. Wilcox writes that,

In China, to be a professional in the field of Chinese dance means to have undergone training in a dance conservatory, where each subcategory of Chinese dance has its own distinct curriculum. It is at the level of training that traditions get defined and formalized. (103)

As Wilcox highlights, Shenyun sleeve dance, as a subcategory of Chinese classical dance, gradually found its way through students' training and exhibitions at national educational institutions. The performances also signify the national recognition of sleeve dance, providing a broader platform for its independent development. In order for Shenyun sleeve dance to swiftly gain recognition as an independent dance form in China, dance practitioners engaged in its choreography. However, cultural elements such as traditional opera, modern dance, and ballet were influenced and integrated into their choreographies. Li and Lv point out the importance of martial

arts and opera as living traditional arts that provide “traditional aesthetic theories, techniques and stage performance experiences” for the construction of Chinese classical dance (7). This viewpoint highlights the significance of incorporating traditional elements into the development of Chinese classical dance to maintain a close connection with traditional Chinese culture. Li also considers ballet as an effective training system for the development of Chinese classical dance (“Chinese Classical Dance: Where It Comes From and Where It Is Going (Part 1)” 30). While ballet provides a structured training methodology, other influences have also shaped the development of Chinese classical dance. Dance scholar Zhu Min states,

The introduction of Western modern dance met Chinese dance practitioners’ inner demand for the transformation of Chinese dance. The pursuit of creativity and innovative dance forms, displayed in Western modern dance, significantly influenced Chinese dance practice for a long time. (n.p.)

Zhu, Li, and Lv’s views highlight the pursuit of new thinking and expression in the field of dance. Through the introduction of the aesthetics and concepts of ballet and modern dance, traditional dance can better meet the aesthetic needs of contemporary society. Overall, the above viewpoints collectively demonstrate an inclusive and accepting attitude towards multiculturalism in the development of Chinese classical dance and reflect the response to Chinese cultural policy, that is making foreign things serve China and the past serve the present. Undoubtedly, the introduction of modern dance and ballet has influenced the form, movement, and aesthetics of Chinese classical dance, and stimulated the development of sleeve dance choreography.

Sheng Peiqi, a graduate of the first class of the Chinese Classical Dance program at the Beijing Dance Academy, choreographed the sleeve dance *Water of Rivers and Lakes* (江河水) in the 1980s, which received the Dance Classic Award of the Beijing Dance Academy for the New Period (1978-2014). In this sleeve dance work, dim lighting, melancholic accompaniment, and a series of sleeve techniques are used to portray an image of a lonely Chinese woman who desires to escape the constraints and oppression of feudal society. Techniques such as twisting, circling, and grasping the sleeves express the sorrow of women, while movements such as lifting, throwing, and extending the sleeves reflect

their struggle against oppression and yearning for a better life. In addition, the work incorporates techniques such as wind fire wheels (风火轮), xiao suibu (小碎步), point turns (点翻), seamlessly blending ballet techniques with the Shenyun breathing technique, a key element in Chinese classical dance that emphasizes the coordination of movement and breath. Throughout the entire dance, the sleeves move rhythmically with Sheng's body and breath, conveying the desolation of the female character, Meng Jiangnv. This sleeve dance work integrates traditional sleeve techniques, Shenyun breathing techniques, the aesthetics and movement vocabulary of Chinese classical dance, as well as elements of ballet, modern dance, Peking opera, and martial arts, showing the flexibility of contemporary Chinese classical dance choreography. Therefore, by effectively combining elements of Chinese tradition and Western culture, sleeve dance has gained an identity as an independent dance form and has become a coherent traditional artistic expression.

Jiang He Shui, a Chinese dance drama, also achieved significant success as an early sleeve dance work. In 1995, Sheng performed this work at the Plaza Theatre in London, United Kingdom. To this day, it remains an integral part of the sleeve dance curriculum at the Beijing Dance Academy. Additionally, in 1995, the Beijing Dance Academy toured the United States, South Korea, Singapore, and other countries with two classical dance dramas. The sleeve dance segment of *Liang Zhu*, directed by Liu Jianmin, became a highlight. It marked a breakthrough for sleeve dance on the international stage and further solidified its status as a symbol of Chinese traditional culture. As praised by dance historians from the Chinese Academy of Arts:

The revival of sleeve dance is a tremendous contribution to the field of Chinese culture Our traditional culture should have a place for display We should preserve the essence of traditional culture Only things from our own nation can compete in the world. (135)

This statement is a recognition of the revival of sleeve dance. It also emphasizes the importance of preserving and presenting traditional culture, as well as the significance of highlighting one's unique culture in international cultural exchanges.

To sum up, in the modernization process in Chinese society, Chinese classical sleeve dance has undergone an organic and systematic process of invention, and its choreography has also experienced a fusion of traditional and modern elements. Within the framework of the construction and prosperity of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics, the invention of sleeve dance highlights the positive response of dance practitioners to the cultural policies that encouraged utilizing foreign elements, making use of the past, as well as reviving traditional dance. This phenomenon is consistent with Hobsbawm's idea of invented tradition that has a long history. However, the concept is a modern construct that reflects the development and construction of the nation and nationalism in contemporary times. Within this framework, sleeve dance can be seen as an invented tradition reaching back to ancient times, thus implying a continuity of tradition while demonstrating the vitality of modern innovation in a new socio-political context.

The Era of Globalization: The Flexibility in the Choreography of Chinese Classical Sleeve Dance (2001-2022)

At the beginning of the 21st century, China ushered in the wave of economic and cultural globalization, especially with its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, which marked a milestone in China's full-scale opening to the world. In 2002, then-President Jiang Zemin proposed the global strategy of "going out and introducing in" at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee (The Report of the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China). The core of this strategy emphasized China's more active participation in global economic and cultural exchanges to promote national development. Notably, the strategy not only focused on the economic aspect but also highlighted the global dissemination of culture. The Chinese Minister of Culture Cai Wu explicitly stated that the implementation of this strategy "not only enhances understanding and friendship between different countries and peoples but also demonstrates and disseminates Chinese culture to the world, which is the necessary way to enhance the soft power of Chinese culture" (n.p.). The Chinese government considers important the promotion of cultural soft power in the era of globalization and hopes to enhance its national image and international influence through the global dissemination of culture.

In 2007, then-President Hu Jintao highlighted the importance of culture at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. He elaborated that culture is a vital source of national cohesion and creativity and emphasized its role as a crucial factor in the competition for comprehensive national strength. Hu called for stimulating the creative vitality of the whole nation's culture in order to improve the soft power of national culture (People's Daily). In 2014, President Xi Jinping stressed the importance of developing China's excellent traditional culture at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art. He advocated that in the era of globalization, the arts should keep pace with the development of the times and carry forward the Chinese spirit and cultural confidence (Talks at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art).

It is evident that Chinese leaders emphasize the pivotal role of traditional culture in competing for comprehensive national strength and advocate the holistic development of traditional culture to shape the national image and enhance soft power. However, Chinese Minister Cai Wu's remarks also underscore China's concerns about cultural globalization and the country's cultural soft power:

The cultural soft power is strong in the West and China is weak, which is incompatible with China's international status. Western developed countries are stepping up cultural export and ideological infiltration into China by virtue of their economic, scientific and technological advantages, making the struggle between infiltration and reverse osmosis more complicated. Our country has five thousand years of civilization and rich cultural resources, but they have not been fully transformed into our soft power. Compared with China's economic and political influence, Chinese culture's international influence and communication power are still relatively weak. (n.p.)

This statement underscores the urgency of China's efforts to strengthen its cultural soft power and its anxiety about maintaining the uniqueness of its national culture.

Although Chinese classical dance has rich national cultural connotations, it has encountered, under the influence of modernization and globalization, some controversies and problems. For example, dance scholar Yan Zhenzhen believes

that the emphasis on technique in Chinese classical dance blurred its aesthetic characteristics. Dance scholar Tian Tian suggests that the adaptation of Chinese classical dance to ballet techniques, especially its incorporation of ballet-style jumping, has disrupted the unique dynamic rhythm and rhythmic beauty of Chinese classical dance (24). Meanwhile, for dance scholar Zhu Min “when classical dance and modern-style dance are interwoven, the shared themes and emotions have led to a definitional blurring and different forms of dance” (104). In order to deal with these issues, dance practitioners responded positively to the explicit request to “emphasize ‘nationalization’ and properly remove ‘ballet’” in Chinese classical dance (176). This requirement underscores the urgent need to emphasize local cultural characteristics in the development of Chinese classical dance and issues a caution against the excessive incorporation of ballet elements.

In 2022, the researchers observed a growing integration of Chinese elements into 21st century sleeve dance classes in Chinese classical dance courses. This includes the incorporation of traditional Chinese musical accompaniment and dancers dressed in traditional Chinese attire. These changes show how dance practitioners responded positively to the government’s call for the promotion of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary artistic practices. Furthermore, Chinese dancer Wang Yabin performed the sleeve dance *Ink Rhyme* (墨韵) at the BRICS leaders’ Meeting and the 10th Anniversary Gala of the Boao Forum for Asia in 2015. This performance exemplifies the strategic use of sleeve dance as a tool of cultural diplomacy, highlighting Chinese aesthetics and soft power on the international stage. An analysis of online resources and performance recordings reveals that the choreography is set to the guqin⁸ melody *Mei Hua San Nong* (梅花三弄). In this context, Wang’s fluid manipulation of the long sleeves is intricately synchronized with the ink painting projected on the stage screen, creating the visual illusion that the painting responds to her movements. With the intensification of the guqin music, Wang presents a dazzling performance of swirling sleeves, tossing sleeves, and gathering sleeves. Through body movements of twisting, leaning, rounding, and bending, she seamlessly integrates the sleeve techniques with the rhythm of the body, and the flowing lines of the water sleeves with those of the ink painting, creating a visually stunning performance. At the same time, a traditional Chinese painter on stage paints in rhythm with the dance. This sleeve dance shows a new

aesthetic by combining more ancient Chinese cultural elements, such as traditional Chinese sleeve dress, traditional Chinese painting, traditional Chinese music and musical instruments, and embodies a flexible choreographic strategy.

This flexible choreographic strategy aligns with Lin's concept of choreographic flexibility. Lin believes that Taiwan's complex social and political background has influenced the development of traditional dance, allowing dance practitioners to flexibly incorporate various elements to create new choreography in different periods to respond to the influence of contemporary global trends. Similarly, mainland China and Taiwan share ways of expressing nationalism and constructing traditional culture. Through the flexible choreographic strategies adopted by dance practitioners in the era of globalization, sleeve dance has achieved a balance between tradition and modernity, local and international. This discussion highlights the adjustment and innovation of traditional dance in response to the changes and needs of Chinese society and politics.

Conclusion

This study examined the invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance during the contemporary socialist era in China. By focusing on three distinct periods of Chinese social development and transformation, the study has argued that the invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance through choreographic flexibility, reflects potential political aspirations for the development of Chinese national culture. It is also a response to the ever-changing social, political, economic, and cultural landscape in China.

Firstly, the analysis of the early stages of socialist construction in China (1949-1978) emphasized the complex interplay of Soviet influence, cultural policies, collaboration, and challenges in the development of Chinese classical dance. Under the guidance of the Chinese government, dance practitioners took proactive measures to practice Chinese classical dance, seeking a balance between foreign cultural elements and indigenous characteristics. Despite setbacks during the Cultural Revolution, the practices of this period laid the foundation for the emergence of the Shenyun sleeve dance. Subsequently, the focus on the period of national rejuvenation and reform (1978-2001) revealed how the invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance reflects the complex interaction between political, economic,

and cultural dynamics. In response to the ever-changing cultural landscape, sleeve dance emerged as a symbol of national identity, underwent an organic and systematic invention process, and successfully integrated traditional and modern elements in its choreography. This phenomenon aligns with the broader narrative of invented tradition, highlighting the role of cultural policies in shaping the contemporary cultural landscape of China and the desire to revive traditional dance. Lastly, the examination of the globalization era (2001-2022) underscored the interaction between government guidance, cultural concerns, and practitioners' responses, reflecting the subtle ways in which traditional dance is protected and innovated to cope with the changing social and political dynamics in the global context. This period particularly highlights the flexible changes in sleeve dance choreography to adapt to the evolving socio-political landscape in China amid globalization.

This study has shown that the invention of the Shenyun sleeve dance is closely related to the transformation of Chinese society. As a product of national flexibility, Shenyun sleeve dance reflects how dance practitioners navigate socio-political and cultural shifts in contemporary China. This transformative process involves the restructuring of cultural policies, the evolving role of dance in constructing national identity, and the incorporation of diverse artistic influences into Chinese classical dance. Through this process, dance practitioners have developed flexible strategies to balance tradition and modernity, as well as between local and international influences within the framework of official ideology.

In conclusion, this study provided valuable insights into the flexible invention and evolution of the Shenyun sleeve dance. However, some aspects have not been deeply discussed and are worthy of further research. Future studies could focus on the pedagogical significance of sleeve dance in Chinese higher education institutions and examine how dance practitioners effectively integrate this dance form into curriculum design. In addition, comparative analyses between the Shenyun sleeve dance and other types of sleeve dances could be considered to deepen the understanding of the similarities and differences among various sleeve dance forms. These potential research directions contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the development of Chinese classical sleeve dance and its application in education and cultural heritage.

Notes

- 1 Jiang Zemin's report at the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China defines socialist culture as one that is guided by Marxism and serves both ideological and educational functions. It aims to cultivate citizens with strong moral and cultural foundations while promoting a modern, nationally rooted, and globally aware cultural system. The report highlights the importance of aligning cultural development with socialism, encouraging intellectual and artistic diversity through policies such as letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend. Additionally, it emphasizes drawing from China's cultural heritage and selectively integrating foreign cultural influences to build a socialist spiritual civilization. (15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 1997)
- 2 For relevant policies under the leadership of the Deng Xiaoping period, see the report of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China here: <https://fuwu.12371.cn/2012/06/11/ARTI1339400277677166.shtml>.
- 3 When China joined the WTO in 2001, it implemented more open policies for the economy, intellectual property rights, services, and trade in goods. For specific policy content, please see the website of the Ministry of Commerce of the people's Republic of China: <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/Nocategory/200612/20061204000376.html>.
- 4 The term 'strategy' is used to describe the intentional and planned efforts of dance practitioners to respond to the ever-changing environments in which they operate. These efforts include the selection of appropriate cultural elements, the invention of new sleeve dance forms, and the promotion of these dance forms within specific social, economic, and political contexts. In particular, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, four distinct schools of Chinese classical dance have emerged: Shenyun School, Han-Tang School, Kun Dance School and Dunhuang School. Of these, three schools have invented different types of sleeve dance, including Shenyun sleeve dance, Han-Tang sleeve dance, and Kun sleeve dance. In the process of inventing these dance forms, dance practitioners have employed different strategies to achieve their goals and meet specific challenges. Therefore, in this case study, the term 'strategy' is of critical importance for the analysis of the specific methods and actions employed by dance practitioners to invent and promote Shenyun sleeve dance in China's evolving social landscape. This analytical framework helps us to comprehend the intricacies involved in the development and dissemination of Chinese classical dance.
- 5 In order to avoid changing the meaning of the original word, this study uses the direct transliteration of Chinese Shenyun Sleeve Dance (身韵袖舞).
- 6 For conciseness, CPC refers to the Communist Party of China.
- 7 The 36th session was a significant academic event focusing on Chinese classical dance and other traditional performance arts. It included a total of thirty-six meetings attended by core faculty members from major institutions, as well as invited experts from various dance troupes and academies. Discussions also touched upon the preservation and use of regional theatrical traditions, such as the Ji Opera (Li et al. *The History of the Teaching System of Chinese Classical Dance* 119–35).
- 8 Guqin, a seven-stringed plucked instrument in some ways similar to the zither, with a history of at least three thousand years, is the most revered instrument of ancient China (Poster News).

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