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The Power of the Circle: The Development and Value Orientation of Square Dancing in China — Focusing on the Health Promotion and Community Building of Ethnic Circle Dances

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Abstract

Square dancing has become one of the most widely practiced and geographically widespread forms of popular cultural activity in contemporary China. However, existing scholarship has focused primarily on governance challenges and the health benefits of square dancing, while providing insufficient systematic attention to its roots in traditional Chinese culture and its potential for value formation. Drawing on documentary research, field observation, and logical analysis, this study examines ethnic circle dances, including Tibetan Guozhuang, Yi Dati Dance, and Dai Gaguang Dance, as representative cases. It traces the historical development of Chinese square dancing from the tradition of circle dances accompanied by linked arms and communal singing, and proposes and examines the concept of the "threefold guidance" of circle dancing. At the physical level, moderate-intensity aerobic exercise and low barriers to participation encourage healthy lifestyles. At the psychological and social levels, the egalitarian structure of the circle formation and the synchrony of collective dancing foster organizational identification, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. At the spiritual and cultural levels, the symbolic structure of the "concentric circle" promotes ethnic unity and a shared sense of community among the Chinese nation. Building on these findings, the study proposes a four-stage progressive model of "circle-based guidance": physical engagement → emotional connection → group identification → value internalization. The model is further examined through the author's action research on bringing ethnic circle dances into communities and schools. The study argues that ethnic circle dances constitute both a cultural foundation and a value core of square dancing. Their creative transformation should therefore follow the principles of "simplifying the form while preserving its rhythmic essence, retaining the musical roots and lyrics, and maintaining the circle formation." In this way, ethnic circle dances can play a greater role in advancing both the Healthy China initiative and the strategic goal of fostering a strong sense of community among the Chinese nation.

Keywords:

square dancing; circle dance; Guozhuang; Dati Dance; Gaguang; health promotion; a shared sense of community among the Chinese nation

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1. Introduction

Square dancing is one of the most vibrant forms of popular culture to have emerged across China since the reform and opening-up period. From major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen to remote towns and rural communities, people gather to dance wherever there is an open space and a sound system. At the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, a mass square-dance performance set to the song Together for a Shared Future appeared on the world stage, marking the recognition of this grassroots cultural activity at the national level [1]. According to incomplete statistics from cultural authorities, tens of millions of people participate in square dancing across China. Its large participant base, broad geographic reach, and high level of public acceptance have made it an important component of contemporary popular cultural life.

Despite its enormous social scale, academic research on square dancing has shown a pronounced tendency to focus on problems while paying less attention to its cultural and value dimensions. Communication studies have examined issues such as noise disturbances and the media stigmatization of "square-dancing grannies"; management studies have focused on the provision of venues and governance mechanisms; and sports research has emphasized its health benefits. By comparison, systematic theoretical explanations of where square dancing comes from, why people dance, and where this cultural practice is heading remain limited. In particular, its cultural roots and value-guiding functions have received insufficient attention.

This becomes especially evident in ethnic minority regions in western China. In Yushu, Qinghai; Liangshan, Sichuan; and Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, for example, the dances performed in public squares are often ethnic circle dances such as Guozhuang, Dati Dance, and Gaguang. Tibetan, Han, Yi, Hui, Dai, and other ethnic groups gather in circles, holding hands and dancing together while singing. This phenomenon suggests that square dancing is not a culturally rootless practice. Rather, it has a profound historical relationship with the long-standing tradition of circle dancing in China. To a considerable extent, the guiding functions of square dancing derive from the same mechanisms through which circle dancing has historically shaped individual and collective experience.

Against this background, this study addresses three questions: What historical and logical relationship exists between Chinese square dancing and ethnic circle dances? Through what mechanisms do ethnic circle dances represented by Guozhuang, Dati Dance, and Gaguang promote physical health, psychological well-being, and cultural identification? And how can these functions be strengthened rather than diluted through creative transformation in the contemporary era? Addressing these questions may contribute not only to a renewed understanding of the cultural nature of square dancing but also to the implementation of the Healthy China initiative and the broader goal of fostering a strong sense of community among the Chinese nation at the grassroots level.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Methods

2.1 Research Methods

This study employs three complementary research methods.

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First, documentary research was conducted using “square dancing,” “Guozhuang,” “Dati Dance,” “elephant-foot drum dance,” “Gaguang,” “traditional ethnic sports,” and “a strong sense of community among the Chinese nation” as the primary search terms. Relevant literature was systematically retrieved from CNKI, Wanfang Data, and local documentary sources from ethnic minority regions, with particular attention to articles published in core Chinese journals, intangible cultural heritage nomination and protection materials, and relevant local gazetteers.

Second, field observation was conducted between 2025 and 2026. The author carried out participant observation and semi-structured interviews in three representative settings for ethnic circle dances: a county-town square on the northwestern Sichuan plateau, Yuecheng Square in Xichang, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, and a public square in Mangshi, Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. More than 60 dance sessions were observed, and more than 50 dancers, ordinary participants, and spectators were interviewed, generating approximately 40,000 Chinese characters of field notes.

Third, logical analysis was used to examine the relationships between the formal elements of circle dancing—including circular formations, linked arms, clockwise rotation, and singing and dancing—and its functional elements, including physical exercise, social interaction, socialization, and identity formation. On this basis, an explanatory model was developed.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

The analysis is grounded in three theoretical perspectives.

The first is Fei Xiaotong’s theory of the “pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation.” According to this perspective, the Chinese nation has developed as an integrated entity through long-term interaction, exchange, and integration among diverse ethnic groups, characterized by continuous processes in which different groups influence and become part of one another [2]. Circle dancing provides a particularly visible bodily expression of this pattern. Representative dances of the Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, Dai, Naxi, Lisu, and other ethnic groups commonly employ circular formations, while the circulation of dances across ethnic boundaries is widespread in southwestern China [3].

The second is Émile Durkheim’s theory of “collective effervescence.” In The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim argued that synchronized bodily actions during collective gatherings can generate emotions that transcend individual experience and strengthen moral solidarity within groups [4]. Circle dancing, through shared rhythms, orientations, and steps, incorporates individual bodies into a collective rhythm and thus provides a particularly clear mechanism for producing collective effervescence.

The third is social identity theory and the associated research tradition on the “social cure.” A substantial body of empirical research has shown that group membership can influence physical and psychological health through the mediating effects of self-esteem and social identification [5]. Together, these three perspectives provide a multilevel analytical framework encompassing the macro level of ethnic relations, the meso level of group mechanisms, and the micro level of individual psychology.

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3. The Development of Chinese Square Dancing and the Cultural Gene of Circle Dancing

3.1 From Linked-Arm Singing and Dancing to Square Dancing: An Overlooked Historical Lineage

Square dancing is often regarded as a phenomenon of the twenty-first century. However, tracing its formal characteristics reveals a lineage of circle dancing extending back thousands of years.

In 1973, a painted pottery basin from the Majiayao culture was excavated at the Shangsunzhai cemetery in Datong, Qinghai. The interior depicts 15 figures divided into three groups, holding hands and dancing. In 1995, another painted pottery basin was excavated at the Zongri site in Tongde, depicting two groups of 11 and 13 figures dancing with their arms linked. Archaeologists regard these artifacts as among the earliest known physical evidence of dance in China. Their linked-arm circular formations closely resemble the Guozhuang dances still practiced among Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, and other ethnic groups [6]. These findings suggest that collective singing and dancing in linked circular formations constituted one of the earliest shared forms of bodily culture among the peoples of ancient China.

Written records provide further evidence of this historical lineage. The Book of the Later Han records that dancers sometimes formed groups of several dozen people, moving together and stamping their feet to create the rhythm. During the Han dynasty, courtly traditions included singing and dancing while linking arms and stamping the ground. Poems by Liu Yuxi and Zhang Hu from the Tang dynasty also document the popularity of linked-arm or linked-sleeve dancing. By the Qing dynasty, written records of Guozhuang had become more explicit. Illustrated Tributary Peoples of the Imperial Qing Dynasty describes people of both sexes joining hands and singing and dancing together in what was called Guozhuang, while Illustrations and Records of Tibet describes Tibetan women joining hands to form a circle and dancing and singing together.

These records indicate that collective singing and dancing in circular formations persisted throughout Chinese history, although its names and social functions changed over time.

Research by Zhou Xing on the genealogy of popular dance in modern China further reveals the modern development of this lineage. From the Yangge movement in the revolutionary base areas to collective dances and “loyalty dances” in the mid-twentieth century, followed by the popularity of social dancing after the reform and opening-up period and the emergence of square dancing in the twenty-first century, these practices constitute a continuous genealogy of popular collective dance [7]. Each stage retained core formal elements such as circular formations, synchronized steps, and common rhythms. In this morphological sense, square dancing can therefore be understood as a contemporary variation of traditional circle dancing and as a modern expression of the circle-dance tradition in urban public spaces.

3.2 Factors Behind the Rise of Contemporary Square Dancing

The rapid expansion of square dancing during the second decade of the twenty-first century was driven by profound social structural changes.

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On the demand side, first, population aging generated substantial demand among middle-aged and older adults for exercise and social interaction. With its low barriers to participation, low cost, and strong social dimension, square dancing became an accessible option. Second, urbanization transformed traditional networks of familiarity, creating a need for new forms of emotional connection among people who had moved into cities. Square dancing consequently contributed to the re-establishment of familiarity within increasingly anonymous urban environments [8]. Third, Mi Li's research shows that for middle-aged and older women, square dancing is not simply a form of physical exercise but also a form of everyday practice through which they regulate themselves, construct their identities, and develop a sense of recognition and belonging [9].

On the supply side, the large-scale development of urban public spaces such as squares provided suitable venues, while the widespread availability of sound systems and digital network technologies reduced organizational costs.

At the policy level, in 2015, the Ministry of Culture, the General Administration of Sport of China, and two other government departments jointly issued the Notice on Guiding the Healthy Development of Square-Dance Activities. This placed square dancing within the broader framework of modern public cultural services. Subsequent institutional arrangements, including national square-dance festivals and square-dance awards under the Stars Award, further transformed square dancing from a spontaneous grassroots activity into a nationally guided form of popular cultural practice [1]. The square-dance performance at the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics can be regarded as a landmark event in this transformation.

Importantly, traditional folk-dance elements were incorporated into square dancing during this process of institutional guidance. At the launch ceremony of the 2023 National Square Dance Festival, six of the seven selected performance groups from different regions incorporated movement elements from folk traditions, including Miao Lusheng dance, fisherfolk Yangge, and She ethnic dance. Huang Jiying and Li Qiong have argued that in rural settings, traditional dance provides material for square dancing, while the stage-oriented logic of square dancing reshapes the form of rural dance, creating a relationship characterized by interaction, integration, and coexistence [8]. This observation highlights a central point of the present study: square dancing and traditional circle dances are not in a relationship of substitution but of mutual nourishment.

3.3 Circle Dancing as the Cultural Foundation of Square Dancing

This study defines "circle dance" as a form of collective singing and dancing characterized by a circular formation, physical connection through linked arms or joined hands, clockwise movement as the basic trajectory (with some dances moving counterclockwise), and the integration of singing and dancing.

Circle dancing occupies a distinctive position in the dance traditions of China's ethnic groups. Tibetan Guozhuang and Xianzi, Yi Dati Dance and Zuojiao Dance, Dai Gaguang, Qiang Salang, Naxi Dati, Lisu Achimu Gua, Tujia Baishou Dance, and the group-circle component of Han Yangge all belong to this broad category.

In The Culture of Chinese Folk Dance, Luo Xiongyan identifies these dances as representative forms in regions where agrarian and grassland cultures intersect and argues that their circular structures derive from collective memories associated with ancestral communities dancing around fires and working together [10].

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From a formal perspective, circle dancing and contemporary square dancing share a highly similar structure. The circle corresponds to a centripetal arrangement around a central point such as a sound system or dance leader; linked arms correspond to bodily cooperation and rhythmic synchronization among dancers; clockwise movement corresponds to the natural flow of the formation; and singing and dancing correspond to the integration of music and movement. In this sense, the organizational structure of square dancing represents a simplified and generalized form of circle dancing.

In ethnic regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Qinghai, however, such simplification has not necessarily occurred. What people dance in public squares may be Guozhuang or Dati Dance itself. Understanding the guiding functions of square dancing therefore requires returning to circle dancing as its cultural foundation.

4. The Threefold Guidance of Circle Dancing

Circle dancing guides participants through three interconnected dimensions—physical, psychological and social, and spiritual and cultural—which form a progressive structure from the external to the internal.

4.1 Physical Guidance: Promoting Health Through the Circular Structure

The formal structure of circle dancing is naturally compatible with the requirements of scientific exercise, making it an effective vehicle for health promotion.

At the physiological level, square dancing constitutes moderate-intensity aerobic exercise. Regular participation can improve cardiorespiratory fitness, balance, flexibility, and muscle strength. An experimental study by Ren Bingxin and Liu Shengjie found that several months of square-dance intervention significantly improved psychological health indicators among middle-aged and older women and reduced levels of anxiety and depression [11]. Recent research integrating exercise and medical care has further indicated that exercise interventions based on square dancing can improve blood pressure, blood glucose, blood lipid levels, and quality of life among middle-aged and older adults with chronic conditions such as hypertension and diabetes. The World Health Organization has likewise identified dancing as a form of physical activity associated with broad health benefits.

The circular structure also offers distinctive advantages for exercise efficiency. First, a circle has no fixed beginning or end, and all participants remain approximately equidistant from the center. Demonstrations of movements can therefore be transmitted relatively evenly, reducing the learning barrier. Second, circles can naturally be arranged concentrically. More experienced dancers can occupy inner circles and perform faster movements, while beginners remain in outer circles and follow slower rhythms, allowing participants to regulate exercise intensity and creating opportunities for differentiated instruction. Field observations repeatedly documented this arrangement. At a square in a county in Qinghai, for example, Guozhuang groups often formed four or five concentric circles, with movement speeds in the inner and outer circles differing by nearly half. One 62-year-old participant reported that she had practiced ethnic square dancing for ten years and described improvements in her physical condition as well as the opportunity to meet people from different ethnic groups.

Third, the combination of linked hands and circular movement engages the upper and lower limbs and

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the trunk in coordinated movement. Typical Guozhuang movements, such as leg crossing and turning steps, combine strength and flexibility training. Their multi-joint, multidirectional movement patterns may also help reduce the risk of falls among older adults.

From a public-health perspective, the guiding function of circle dancing is further reflected in its accessibility. It is generally free, open to people of different ages, and allows participants to join or leave at any time. This high level of accessibility is a key reason why square dancing can serve as a grassroots vehicle for the Healthy China initiative.

4.2 Psychological and Social Guidance: Cultivating Identification, Self-Esteem, and Well-Being Through Equality and Synchrony

The structure of circle dancing embodies psychological cues of equality, connection, and belonging and can contribute to organizational identification, self-esteem, and subjective well-being among participants.

First, the circle is a formation without a designated "main character." A rectangular formation has a front and a back, and a linear formation has leaders and followers. By contrast, people in a circle are positioned at roughly equal distances from the center and face one another, with no inherent distinction between principal and supporting roles. This structure conveys a sense of equality. For middle-aged and older adults moving from familiar institutional communities into increasingly individualized urban environments, such an arrangement can provide meaningful psychological compensation. Within the circle, each participant is visible and has a role to play. Mi Li's research shows that women participating in square dancing engage in self-regulation and identity construction through collective practice and develop feelings of recognition, belonging, and enjoyment [9].

Second, synchronized dancing creates interpersonal connection. A substantial body of research in psychology and neuroscience has demonstrated that synchronized bodily movement can enhance interpersonal trust and feelings of closeness. Circle dancing combines a common rhythm, synchronized steps, and physical contact through linked arms, incorporating dozens or even hundreds of people into a shared rhythmic system. This represents a particularly strong form of synchronous connection. In Durkheim's terms, collective effervescence emerges as individuals experience a sense of being part of something greater than themselves, while the moral energy of the group is periodically reproduced through collective activity [4].

Third, empirical research provides direct support for this mechanism. In a study of 366 older adults participating in square dancing, Wu Yuting et al. found that the organizational climate of square-dance groups influenced subjective well-being through two pathways: the independent mediating effect of self-esteem and the serial mediating pathway of organizational identification and self-esteem. Improving the organizational climate enhanced subjective well-being and contributed to successful, active, and healthy aging [5]. This finding provides empirical support for a causal chain linking square-dance participation, group identification, and psychological well-being.

The author's field observations also support this relationship. The Dati Dance group at Yuecheng Square in Xichang, Liangshan, attracts hundreds of participants each evening. Several interviewees described their fellow dancers as "closer than relatives," while one woman recovering from surgery said that the dance group

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had “dispersed the gloom of illness.” Such emotional support networks appeared substantially stronger than ordinary neighborhood relationships.

4.3 Spiritual and Value Guidance: Strengthening a Shared Sense of Community Through the Symbolism of the “Concentric Circle”

Circle dancing is a form of embodied culture created and shared across ethnic groups. Its concentric structure provides an embodied representation of the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation and can foster ethnic unity and a shared sense of community through everyday collective dancing.

Historically, circle dancing has both reflected and facilitated interaction, exchange, and integration among ethnic groups. As discussed above, the tradition of circular collective dancing extends from the linked-arm dancers depicted on Majiayao pottery to descriptions of Guozhuang in Qing-period local records. Across southwestern China, the circulation of dances among different ethnic groups is widespread. Some accompanying musical traditions are found among both the Naxi and Pumi peoples and are so similar that they cannot be attributed exclusively to any single ethnic group; rather, they have been jointly cultivated and enriched by local communities [3]. Deng Youling argues that Chinese dance culture constitutes an important cultural gene of the Chinese nation and that different ethnic groups establish emotional connections and cultural identification through shared bodily practices, making dance an important form of artistic practice for constructing a shared spiritual home of the Chinese nation [3].

In contemporary ethnic minority regions, circles formed through multiethnic dancing have become an ordinary feature of grassroots social life. In Qinghai, whether in the Sanjiang Tu community along the Yellow River, the modern city of Xining surrounded by the Huangshui River, or the new city of Golmud at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains, Tibetan, Han, Tu, Mongolian, Hui, and other ethnic groups can be seen forming circles and dancing Guozhuang together [6]. In Weixi, Yunnan, four major ethnic dance squares in the county town attract middle-aged and older adults, young people, and children every evening, with Lisu, Tibetan, Naxi, and Yi dances performed in succession. Hundreds of people form numerous concentric circles, holding hands and standing shoulder to shoulder. In Lanping, Yunnan, people from different ethnic groups hold hands and dance to Pumi Tsocuo, Tibetan Guozhuang, and Han Yangge. As one local resident put it, “We don't distinguish between ethnic groups here. Once the music starts, everyone just dances together.” Such scenes indicate that circle-dance spaces can serve as natural platforms for building ethnically integrated communities. With a low cultural threshold, they bring people from different ethnic groups into the same circle and create an everyday sense of “us” through shared rhythm.

The community-building function of circle dancing operates primarily through embodied participation rather than verbal instruction. The circular form itself serves as a metaphor for concentric unity: multiple ethnic groups and social circles surround the same center, with each circle retaining its own rhythm and cultural characteristics while sharing a common beat. This offers a dynamic representation of pluralistic unity. Unlike slogans and lectures, which depend primarily on linguistic communication, collective dancing is embodied, immersive, and repeatedly experienced in everyday life. Durkheim’s idea of collective rituals reproducing social solidarity is thus enacted in ordinary public spaces through routine evening dancing [4].

The three forms of guidance should not be understood as parallel or independent. Rather, they form a pro-

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gression from the external to the internal and from the body to the mind. Bodily engagement provides the starting point: people initially participate for exercise and recreation. Emotional connection serves as the intermediary: people continue because they develop relationships with fellow dancers. Value internalization constitutes the outcome: through collective dancing, participants develop a broader sense of "us." The following sections examine this progression in greater detail.

5. Case Studies: Three Forms of Circle-Dance Practice

5.1 Tibetan Guozhuang: From the Hearth to the Public Square as a Shared Cultural Practice

Guozhuang, known in Tibetan as Zhuo, literally refers to circle dancing. It is a Tibetan folk dance that integrates dance, music, and poetry and is widely practiced in Changdu and Nagqu in Tibet; Aba and Ganzi in Sichuan; Diqing in Yunnan; and Tibetan communities in Qinghai and Gansu. The Guozhuang dance of Yushu, Qinghai, was included in the first batch of China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006.

Guozhuang can be classified into large, medium, and small forms according to the occasion and into Quzhuo, which carries stronger religious elements, and Mengzhuo, which is more recreational, according to function. Its musical and movement structure generally includes slow, moderate, and fast sections. The slow section may consist primarily of singing without dancing and has a solemn, traditional character. The fast section features high leg lifts and vigorous movements, with men swinging their sleeves like eagles while other movements remain fluid and graceful.

From the perspective of its guiding functions, the Guozhuang case offers three insights. First, its slow–moderate–fast structure naturally creates an exercise sequence resembling warm-up, main activity, and climax. Its health value has repeatedly been documented in research on traditional ethnic sports. Second, Guozhuang integrates performance, visual appreciation, recreation, and collective participation. Coordinated movement and shared rhythm provide embodied training in cooperation and solidarity. Third, and most importantly, as interaction and integration among ethnic groups have deepened, Guozhuang has become a "shared cultural practice" among people of different ethnic backgrounds in Qinghai [6]. In Yushu, Guozhuang has entered communities, villages, and schools, and modified versions have been incorporated into physical exercises in primary and secondary schools. In 2019, the Chinese Dancers Association designated Yushu as the "Hometown of Tibetan Dance in China." The transformation of Guozhuang from a local tradition into a form of public-square dancing thus represents a process through which ethnic culture becomes shared culture, allowing a sense of community to develop naturally through embodied participation.

5.2 Yi Dati Dance: Cultural Reproduction Under Institutional Involvement

Dati Dance is a circle dance widely practiced in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan and surrounding Yi communities. In the Yi language, "Dati" means "stamping the ground," referring to dancing through rhythmic foot-stamping movements. It is a collective circle dance.

Importantly, contemporary Dati Dance is not simply an "untouched" traditional form. Zhang Chengyu's

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research shows that in the 1980s, experts organized by the Liangshan prefectural government systematized and choreographed Dati Dance on the basis of folk songs and dances. It therefore represents a process of adjustment and restructuring of ethnic musical culture under conditions of modernization. While grounded in traditional folk melodies, it also underwent standardized recreation [12]. Hu Jiuying and Liu Jinbin describe Dati Dance as a "circle dance integrating sport, music, and art" [13]. Since the reform and opening-up period, the recreation of traditional folk dances has become increasingly common, and Dati Dance represents a prominent example. As a new folk tradition, it has continued to contribute to cultural and moral development throughout its processes of creation, dissemination, and reception and offers important implications for promoting ethnic harmony, mutual trust, and appreciation.

The Dati Dance case demonstrates that the guiding functions of circle dancing can be consciously constructed and reproduced. Through institutional arrangements such as Torch Festival bonfire celebrations, in which designated dancers lead each group; the widespread promotion of Dati Dance in public squares in Xichang; and its incorporation into school exercises and university orientation programs, Dati Dance has become a common language of interethnic interaction. The author's field observations indicate that Yi and Han participants at Yuecheng Square in Xichang are present in roughly comparable proportions. Several Han participants reported that after following the dance for several years, "Yi culture feels like a culture right around me."

This finding is consistent with Zhao Ming and Liu Yi's observation that Yi dance in Liangshan has undergone a process of modernization and transformation that has enabled it to acquire new vitality [14]. The standardized components of this "invented" tradition have, paradoxically, created conditions for the dance to cross ethnic boundaries and perform a broader guiding function. At the same time, caution is necessary: when commercialization detaches the dance from its cultural meaning and reduces Dati Dance to a marketable product, its cultural and value-oriented functions may be weakened.

5.3 Dai Gaguang and Elephant-Foot Drum Dance: The Cohesive Power of a Gentle Circle

"Gaguang" is a Dai term meaning "dancing with the drum." It refers to a collective singing-and-dancing form in which dancers form a circle around an elephant-foot drum, in contrast to the more performative Xieguang, in which dancers accompany the beating of the drum. Elephant-foot drum dance was included in the national representative list of intangible cultural heritage in 2008.

The core movement vocabulary of Gaguang, known as the "three bends," is derived from movements associated with gathering fruit. Dancers use repeated flexion and extension of the knees to generate undulating movements, creating a rhythm that combines strength and softness. These movements vividly reproduce scenes of ancestral agricultural labor and reflect the long history of Dai agrarian culture [1]. E Yueting and Guo Tian's study of the movement characteristics of elephant-foot drum dance shows that its rhythmic system serves both physical-exercise and aesthetic functions [15]. Bai Jingyi argues that Dai dance conveys aspects of ethnic character through a bodily style characterized by tranquility, restraint, and subtlety [16]. Zhu Zhihong's research on women's elephant-foot drum dance among the Dai in Lincang further demonstrates the central role of women in its transmission and its function in community cohesion [17].

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The Gaguang case offers two important insights. First, the guiding function of circle dancing does not depend on vigorous physical movement. Gaguang relies primarily on moderate-to-low-intensity knee movements, making it particularly suitable for middle-aged and older adults as well as beginners. This demonstrates that gentle forms of circle dancing can also have strong health-promoting and cohesive effects and thus expands the range of populations that can benefit from circle dancing.

Second, during festivals such as the Water-Splashing Festival, Gaguang dancers form a circle around the elephant-foot drum. The drum provides both the center and the rhythm of the formation, illustrating the organizational logic of "centering on an object." This is structurally analogous to the use of sound systems as the center of contemporary square dancing and further supports the argument that circle dancing constitutes a cultural foundation of square dancing.

Taken together, the three cases represent three pathways through which circle dancing performs its guiding functions: Guozhuang represents "natural cultural sharing," Dati Dance represents "conscious institutional construction," and Gaguang represents "gentle everyday cohesion." Despite these differences, all three demonstrate that once the circular structure encounters the everyday lives of multiethnic communities, its capacity for connection and guidance can continue to unfold.

6. Practice-Based Findings: The "Circle-Based Guidance" Model and Action Research

6.1 A Four-Stage Progressive Model of "Circle-Based Guidance"

Based on the preceding analysis, this study proposes a four-stage progressive model to explain how circle dancing produces its broader effects.

Stage 1: Bodily engagement. Individuals enter the circle for practical motivations such as exercise and recreation. The low participation threshold and layered structure of the circle provide positive bodily experiences and constitute the material foundation of the guiding process.

Stage 2: Emotional connection. Continued synchronous dancing fosters trust and intimacy among participants. The circle gradually becomes an emotional support network. The serial relationship among organizational identification, self-esteem, and subjective well-being identified by Wu Yuting et al. operates at this stage [5].

Stage 3: Group identification. Individuals incorporate the dance group into their self-concept and develop a sense of "we." The identity construction among women participating in square dancing described by Mi Li [9], as well as field observations such as participants describing the group as "my family," reflects this stage.

Stage 4: Value internalization. In settings characterized by multiethnic participation, the boundaries of "we" expand from the immediate dance group toward the imagined community of the Chinese nation. Ethnic unity and a shared sense of community become embedded in emotional structures through embodied memory. This represents the most advanced stage of the guiding process.

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The four stages progress from the external to the internal, with each preceding stage providing a necessary condition for the next. At the same time, later stages can reinforce earlier ones, creating a positive feedback loop: people who experience better health are more likely to continue participating, while those who develop a strong sense of belonging are more likely to remain engaged. The theoretical contribution of this model lies in integrating research on health promotion with research on community consciousness within a single embodied framework. It suggests that the public square used for exercise and the public square through which shared values are cultivated are, in practice, the same social space.

6.2 Action Research: Development and Pilot Testing of the "Concentric Circles" Ethnic Circle-Dance Curriculum

Building on the proposed model, the research team has conducted action research since 2023 on introducing ethnic circle dances into communities and schools. The project was implemented in three communities and two primary and secondary schools in one city. Its principal outcome was the development and pilot testing of the Concentric Circles series of ethnic circle-dance instructional materials.

The curriculum was developed according to three principles.

First, "simplify the form while preserving its rhythmic essence." Traditional movements from Guozhuang, Dati Dance, and Gaguang were moderately simplified while preserving their distinctive stylistic elements, including Guozhuang sleeve movements and crossing steps, the ground-stamping rhythm of Dati Dance, and the characteristic three-bend movement of Gaguang. This approach was intended to avoid the homogenization often associated with square dancing.

Second, "retain the musical roots and lyrics." The accompanying music preserves the traditional melodic motifs and segments of lyrics in the original languages of the respective dance traditions, allowing participants to experience both the movements and the sounds of the cultures from which they originated.

Third, "maintain the circle formation." Regardless of how the movements are adapted, the circular formation, linked-arm structure, and clockwise rotation remain unchanged because the circular structure itself carries the guiding function of the practice.

The pilot study adopted a quasi-experimental design. The community group recruited 86 middle-aged and older participants, of whom 72 completed the intervention. Participants engaged in circle dancing three times per week for 60 minutes per session over a 12-week period. Before and after the intervention, participants completed a shortened version of the SF-36 quality-of-life scale, the UCLA Loneliness Scale, and a researcher-developed questionnaire measuring willingness to engage in interethnic interaction. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 12 members of a multiethnic dance group.

The results showed significant improvements in participants' physical functioning, emotional functioning, and social functioning scores, together with a significant reduction in loneliness. In the questionnaire on willingness to engage in interethnic interaction, the proportion of participants who responded affirmatively to the statement "I am willing to develop deeper relationships with neighbors from other ethnic groups" increased from 61% before the intervention to 83% afterward. Interview data frequently included statements such as

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"I became familiar with them [friends from other ethnic groups]" and "I never realized their dances were so beautiful," which were consistent with the predictions of the second and third stages of the four-stage model.

In the school group, the curriculum was incorporated into large-group recess activities. Teachers reported improvements in student attendance and recess discipline, and several students from different ethnic groups developed cross-ethnic friendships through dancing together during breaks. It should be noted, however, that the pilot involved a limited sample and did not include a rigorous control group. The generalizability of these findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Larger-scale longitudinal research is needed in the future.

6.3 Discussion: Boundaries and Risks of the Guiding Function

Emphasizing the guiding functions of circle dancing does not mean overlooking its potential risks.

First is the risk of homogenization. The stage-oriented logic of square dancing may reshape traditional dances in ways that dilute the distinctive styles of individual ethnic circle dances and replace them with a standardized "square-dance vocabulary."

Second is the risk of commercialization. When ethnic dances become tourism-oriented performance products, an excessive emphasis on economic returns at the expense of cultural preservation may undermine their cultural substance. Early signs of this tendency have been observed in Liangshan and Danba.

Third is the risk to public accessibility. If conflicts concerning space and noise are not appropriately managed, they may undermine the public spaces on which circle dancing depends.

The effective development of circle dancing therefore requires a balance between preservation and innovation and between self-regulation and external governance. This balance provides the basis for the policy recommendations that follow.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study reaches three main conclusions.

First, Chinese square dancing and ethnic circle dances share a morphological and historical lineage. From the linked-arm dancers depicted on Majiayao painted pottery to the Guozhuang, Dati Dance, and Gaguang performed today in urban and rural public squares, circle dancing represents a persistent formal element in the history of embodied culture in China, while square dancing constitutes its contemporary expression. The guiding functions of square dancing are therefore rooted, to a substantial extent, in the structural characteristics of circle dancing.

Second, circle dancing guides participants through a four-stage process of bodily engagement → emotional connection → group identification → value internalization. This process underlies three interconnected forms of guidance: health promotion, psychological and social development, and spiritual and value formation. These dimensions form a progression from the external to the internal.

Third, the concentric structure of circle dancing provides an embodied model of the pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation. Multiethnic collective dancing in circular formations constitutes an everyday and sustainable

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form through which a shared sense of community among the Chinese nation can be cultivated.

Four recommendations follow from these findings.

At the policy level, the transmission and dissemination of ethnic circle dances should be incorporated into integrated agendas for public cultural services and national fitness. Standardized circle-dance spaces could be developed in ethnic minority regions and urban communities with substantial interethnic interaction, with multiethnic collective dancing incorporated into routine activities promoting ethnic unity.

At the content level, the principles of "simplifying the form while preserving its rhythmic essence, retaining the musical roots and lyrics, and maintaining the circle formation" should be promoted. Intangible cultural heritage practitioners and community sports instructors should be encouraged to jointly develop circle-dance curricula that combine scientific exercise principles with cultural integrity, while avoiding homogenization and excessive commercialization.

At the organizational level, a three-way collaborative grassroots structure involving square-dance leaders, intangible cultural heritage practitioners, and social sports instructors should be established. Such a structure would allow circle-dance communities to retain their capacity for self-organization while receiving cultural and technical support.

At the research level, interdisciplinary collaboration among sports science, dance studies, ethnology, and psychology should be strengthened. Longitudinal and cross-regional studies based on the "circle-based guidance" model should be conducted to provide a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding how square dancing can develop from a cultural phenomenon into a broader community resource.

The circle is one of the oldest formations in human collective movement and, at the same time, one of the most enduring modern metaphors for connection. When people from different ethnic groups hold hands and form a single circle in a public square at dusk, health, enjoyment, and a sense of community are produced through the same shared rhythm. This represents one of the distinctive experiences that Chinese square dancing offers to the wider world.

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