# The Status of the Tibetan Traditional Dance in National Culture

2021, Vol.2 No.11
© Art & Design Research 2021
DOI: 10.37420/j.adr.2021.047
https://masonpublish.org

Ya'nan Liu*
College of Fine Arts, Tibet University, Tibet, China
*Corresponding author, e-mail: 809907009@qq.com

Abstract
Tibet has a unique geological and geomorphology, gorgeous natural scenery, rich resources and wealth, as well as the characteristics of the customs. The kind-hearted, brave and hard-working Tibetan people have created the charming traditional Tibetan culture. In this beautiful place of Tibet, the colorful Tibetan traditional dance has been bred, which has an inseparable and irreplaceable position in the splendid Tibetan culture by virtue of its exuberant vitality. In view of this, this article takes the Tibetan traditional dance as the breakthrough point, carries on the detailed analysis from three aspects separately, hoped that may provide the basis for the Tibetan traditional dance tradition, the development and the innovation in the future.

Keywords
National culture; Tibetan traditional dance; Status

## The Tibetan Traditional Dance is a National Cultural Phenomenon

Culture is the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth acquired by human activities in the course of social history. National culture is one of the basic characteristics of a nation. It is a cultural nation with national characteristics formed in the long-term exploration and development of each nation. Generally speaking, the material culture, spiritual culture, system culture and custom culture created by all members of a nation in continuous production, life and survival activities gather into national culture. National culture mainly includes food, clothing, housing and transportation culture; religious belief culture, festival celebration culture, marriage custom culture and other traditional culture with strong ethnic flavor; traditional virtues such as kindness and courage, honesty and simplicity, diligence and hard work. National culture permeates every aspect of life, including people’s way of communication, way of thinking, social behavior, values, artistic aesthetics, emotion and sentiment. It reflects the living environment of each nation, including ecology, society, pol-

itics, economy and culture, and condenses the character, concept, will and morality of a nation for a long time. It has inheritance, continuity and relative stability, and is not easy to change. Although national culture is an invisible ability, it is an important power to present national wisdom, the spiritual pillar and foundation stone of a nation, and the backbone to lead a country to be prosperous and strong. Therefore, "Strengthening the construction of national culture and enhancing the soft power of culture will help to enhance people's cultural consciousness, even enhance cultural confidence, and enhance people's sense of identity and belonging to the national culture, thereby promoting the prosperity and development of the soft power of culture and further strengthening the cohesion of the country and the nation." (Cia, 2017)

## The Relationship Between Tibetan Traditional Dances and the Mode of Existence

Tibet is situated in the southwest of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the "roof of the world". "The unique plateau culture is developed by its peculiar geology and geomorphology, gorgeous natural views, rich resource and wealth, pious religious beliefs and distinctive customs and traditions. The kind-hearted, brave and hardworking Tibetans have created a charming Tibetan traditional culture with strong Tibetan flavors under the conditions of the plateau." (Liu, 2021) The mysterious and beautiful Tibet gives birth to the magnificent Tibetan traditional dance, which reflects the integration of material culture and spiritual culture of the Tibetan nation in a certain social form, and is also the achievement created by the working people in the process of self-entertainment and emotion expressing. In addition, the Tibetan traditional dance is directly learned, communicated and inherited among the general public and the dances with different styles and characteristics are formed. Therefore, the Tibetan traditional dance is featured with distinct mass characters, self-entertainment, national characteristics, localism and so on. In fact, the Tibetan traditional dance is tightly related to their specific mode of production and traditional cultural literacy. The main productive activities of people in farming areas are sowing, reaping and threshing, so the dance in farming areas is inseparable from the manners of agricultural work and the movements of sowing and reaping; In nomadic areas, the herdsmen ride horses on the vast grassland, feed cattle and sheep, milk, whip and so on year after year. What's more, the bad weather and hard life contribute to the bold and unrestrained personalities of herdsmen and their strong bodies. As a result, the movements of milking and cattle and sheep driving are extracted from the dance with substantial ranges and strong forces; The main productive activities in forest areas are firewood cutting and hunting, therefore, the dance movements symbolizing logging, hunting and so on are evolved from the labor movement in forest areas. It is clearly showed based on these various dance types that Tibet is mainly dominated by agriculture and animal husbandry. With long engagement in farming and nomadic life, the Tibetan traditional dance belongs to the agricultural and animal husbandry cultural dance and multiple movements of dances indicate their relationships with agricultural and animal husbandry production. The unique rhythm, movement and form of the Tibetan traditional dance are also affected by

the geographical environment and living conditions. The dances vary with various styles and the same style has different forms of expressions. There are both differences and common characters between different dances. Living in the plateau area with an average altitude of more than 4000 meters, high light intensity and thin air, the Tibetans should not move too quickly, but slowly, and their knees should be relaxed. In addition, being in a state of labor for a long time, it is inevitable for Tibetans to bend and stretch their knees in the process of work, as a result, their knees are habitually kept slightly bent in case of dancing. Therefore, the vibration, flexion and extension of the knee are the most prominent artistic style characteristics of the Tibetan traditional dance. The unconsciously huddling of bodies is resulted from the cold weather, together with heavy clothes and jewelry, the Tibetans have gradually developed the backward of chest and bending habits. There are also religious factors. Tibetan Buddhism is sacred and pious in the heart of Tibetans. Holding hands together and bending down is the basic posture in case of scriptures chanting, kneeling and kowtowing. Under the influence of religion, Tibetans also show the postures of chest backward, bending and forward leaning in their daily life, which are embodied in the Tibetan traditional dance and become the basic postures of the dance. To sum up, the mode of production, geographical environment and cultural competence are vital factors in the formation of types, postures and psychologies of the dance and create the cultural characteristics of wide varieties, diverse forms and unique styles of the Tibetan traditional dance.

## Connotations of the Tibetan Traditional Dance

“The economic base determines the superstructure” is clearly stated in political economics. The Tibetan traditional dance is an integral part of the superstructure and is naturally restricted by the economic base. However, the ideology of people also expressed as ideology plays a fundamental role in dominating the Tibetan traditional dance. Thus, the development and changes of the Tibetan traditional dance in different periods reflect the organizational structures, cultural demands and national psychologies of Tibetans in different periods. The Tibetan traditional dance is developed through primitive dances. It can be learned that there are religious dances combined with religious activities from the remains of primitive dances, which reflects the primitive people’s lowest level demands for life, fear and worship of nature, totems and gods. Later, there is the palace dance specially performed for nobles and officials, the folk dance to entertain themselves and others and various forms of expression, such as artistic and dance works delicately crafted by the creators. Such dances indicate the great changes of human cultural demands from survival needs to entertainment needs and from material demands to spiritual and aesthetic demands, showing the continuous development of national culture. The content conveyed by the Tibetan traditional dance is the significant embodiment of the improvement of national psychology and national cultural competence. “Ancient rock paintings recorded the scenes of men and women dancing or hand in hand dancing. This belonged to the genital dance and showed the courtships of men and women during dancing.

The genital dance was a common spiritual phenomenon at that time and has gradually disappeared with the development of society from now." (Tenzin, 2014) Witchcraft dances and totem dances are essential for the sacrificial activities of the primitive religion of "Bon Religion", such dances reflect the god praising ceremony of religion and indicate people's devotion to the primitive religion of "Bon Religion ". The fact that early people had a certain level of understanding and understanding of dance with own values and aesthetic consciousness developed is reflected by these forms. The Tibetan traditional dance has rapidly developed after the democratic reform of Tibet. A large number of excellent dance works have been created based on the needs of cultural development, such as Laundry Song, Harvest Night, Emancipated Serfs Are Like the Sun, Reba love, etc. These dances have fully proved that the national culture is constantly moving forward.

"With profound cultural implications, the body vocabularies, movement skills and styles and flavors of the Tibetan traditional dance are embedded with deep cultural information, tainted with and imported the cultural cognition, aesthetic expressions and spiritual appeals of all dynasties, and are the most stable cultural DNA of a nation." (Jiang, 2017) Although modern culture has penetrated into the folk and rural areas, the Tibetan traditional dance will not die out and occupy an irreplaceable position as long as the nation still exists. As a special national cultural phenomenon, the Tibetan traditional dance has promoted the progress of national culture, and the development of national culture has also continuously improved all aspects of the Tibetan traditional dance, so that the characteristics of national culture in various times can be expressed incisively and vividly in the Tibetan traditional dance.

## The Tibetan Traditional Dance is the "Living Material" of Folk Customs

### Religious Implication of the Tibetan Traditional Dance

Tibet is the birthplace of Tibetan Buddhism. Almost all the people believe in religion in Tibet. Religion has a far-reaching impact on Tibetans and nearly all of their lives are related to religious contents, for instance, there are grand religious ceremonies being held in the cases of weddings, funerals, social communication, sacrificial celebrations and other activities. Therefore, the religious sacrifice, as a custom, is the most symbolic cultural feature of Tibet. The special dance is not formed in early religious sacrificial activities and only the simple dance with bell ringing, snail blowing, drum beating. In the development of later stage, with the main contents of exorcising evil spirits, seeking refuge, welcoming the new year and auspicious days, publicizing the teachings of various sects, expanding the area of influence and educating the broad masses, "VCham" has become a must of religious sacrificial dance in temples all over the Tibet in case of temple activities. VCham is the special religious sacrificial dance for Tibetan Buddhism. In addition, the animal-like

dances of primitive dances, such as the dumb dance wearing animal skin masks, “Xirong Zhongzi” (Yak dance), “Senzi” (Lion dance), “Maqia Xiabuzhuo” (Peacock dance), “Borun Xiabuzhuo” (Pigeon dance), still enjoy the popularity and are interspersed in religious sacrifice dances. With the changes of folk customs and the development of Tibetan Buddhism, VCham is also continuously developed, and standardization and artistry with own system and huge development space are gradually achieved. Such folk custom reveals the strong inner beliefs of the Tibetans and reflects their deep consciousness. It also provides the best soil for the inheritance, development, preservation and spread of the Tibetan traditional dance. Conversely, the Tibetan traditional dance also plays a guarantee role for the survival, development and publicity of religion.

## Traditional Festivals of the Tibetan Traditional Dance

Traditional festivals are the soul of a region and a nation. Folk customs are confined to traditional festivals and traditional festivals are indispensable from traditional dances. With strong regional characteristics, different areas of Tibet have their unique traditional festivals and celebrations, and the ways of expression reflecting the characteristics of local customs are formed. In the atmosphere of traditional festivals and celebrations, people place the expression of inner feelings and wishes in the dance.

First of all, during the horse racing festival, people put on their costumes, bring Tibetan specialties such as Zanba, Yak meat, etc. and barley wine brewed by their own, and come from various places to get together. They participate in the grand horse racing festival during daytime and perform the Tibetan traditional dance of “Zhuo Sgor-Gzhas” in the evening. Young men and women are concerned with love and romance to find their sweethearts by singing and dancing, and others amuse themselves and dance all night. As the annually grandest festival in the pastoral area, people pray for happiness and success in everything through the performance of “Zhuo Sgor-Gzhas”, which indicates the optimistic and uninhibited mental state of people in the pastoral area.

Secondly, the most magnificent festival in rural Tibet is “Fruit-Awaiting Festival”, in which “Awaiting” means fields or fields, “Fruit” means circling or cruising, and “Fruit-Awaiting” means fields cruising. The “Fruit-Awaiting Festival” will be hold on a selected good day when highland barley becomes more mature and ready for harvest. People gather in the fields to perform the “Sgor-Gzhas” widely spread in rural areas. The whole process is carried out around the highland barley for the praying of a good harvest. People in rural areas have been in the practice of labor and production for a long time, and they develop the quality of simplicity and kindness. Their infinite longing for life is revealed in the traditional dance of “Sgor-Gzhas” in the wonderful festival and celebration.

Thirdly, “Sholdon Festival” is also one of the traditional festivals with a long history in Tibet. “Shol”

is yogurt, “Don” is banquet, which means that this is the day to have yogurt. “Sholdon Festival” was a pure religious festival long before and is gradually enriched with the development of society. The Tibetan opera are started to be performed on “Sholdon Festival” and the mutual communication and competition among various Tibetan opera troupes also promote the development of the Tibetan traditional dance. Thus, it can be seen that the Tibetan traditional dance is inextricably linked with traditional festivals. The former is sublimated and developed with the continuation of latter. Not only will the traditional festivals fade, but also accompanied by the disappearance of a large number of traditional dances if people’s emphasis on traditional festivals is reduced.

As a result, the folk customs are recorded and showed in the Tibetan traditional dance, which is the “living fossil” of folk customs and provides reliable and powerful supports and basis for us to perceive and understand national traditional cultures.

## The Tibetan Traditional Dance Is the Treasury of National Cultural Heritage

Traditional culture is the root of national culture. Without tradition, there would be no inheritance, development and innovation of national culture. Because of the particularity of Tibet’s geographical environment, its traditional dance has a certain closed nature, which makes a large number of excellent traditional dance culture has been better preserved, conducive to the accumulation of national culture.

### Folk Legends in Traditional Tibetan Dances

Almost all kinds of Tibetan traditional dance are endowed with some folk legends and stories, which are very close to the living conditions at that time. In spite of strong mythological flavors, such folk legends and stories are more realistic and local, as a result, most traditional dances have been spread to today and are deeply loved by people. For example, the comprehensive song and dance “gzhaschen”. There is a folk legend when it comes to its origin: In the early stage, people of Yalong tribe carried the king to the place where the tribe was located with their shoulders, so they named the first king ‘Nyatri Tsenpo’. People were cautious and groveling in the process and regarded themselves as cattle and horses with the sounds of cattle and horses. The prototype of “gzhaschen” was formed from then on and was called “Lu” at that time. Later, such form gradually became more complete and was developed into today’s “gzhaschen”, which is performed in a solemn and elegant form of song and dance for grand celebrations.” “‘Reba’ is a performing art mainly based on the timbrel dance. There are rich legends about Reba. Some people believe that “Reba” was created by Milarepa, the founder of the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Some people consider that “Re” means “cloth” in Tibetan, and “Ba” refers to people. Most Reba artists wear Tibetan robes in

coarse cloth, consequently “Reba” means people in cloth. In addition, demons and ghosts always destroyed the temple when repairing the temple at that time. People began to perform “Reba” to suppress the devil and then the temple was successfully built (Tenzin, 2014). There are still many myths about “Reba”. Despite there is no clear answer, Reba is one of the representative dances of Tibetan traditional dances with a long history and rich contents. Such myths and legends make contributions to the material culture and spiritual culture with national and regional characteristics of the Tibetan traditional dance.

## Folk Materials in Tibetan Traditional Dance

Tibet is a vast region, and there are different forms of dances in different regions and the same region. Tibetan traditional dances provide valuable and reliable first-hand information for researchers in terms of dance styles, dance rhythms, dance movements, dance props and costume jewelry. At the same time, from the perspective of ethnology, history, anthropology, sociology and other cross-disciplines, Tibetan traditional dance also has a strong research value.Tibet is known as the “sea of song and dance”. Song and dance are inseparable. The combination of traditional Musical Instruments and traditional dance shows the rich connotation of national culture. Driven and promoted by the popularization, Tibetan traditional dance is no longer just a local culture, but has entered the city, its coverage is becoming wider and stronger, and its influence is becoming stronger and stronger. Professional art groups make full use of resources, experience life at grassroots level, extensively collect Tibetan traditional dance materials, maintain its original and primitive style and characteristics, and create a series of excellent artistic works with the color of Tibetan traditional culture, endowing Tibetan traditional dance with new extension and connotation. This is also the further refinement and sublimation of Tibetan traditional dance culture.

## Many Traditional Tibetan Dances Have Been Included in the List of “National Intangible Cultural Heritage”

As the Chinese government attaches more importance to the traditional Culture of Intangible cultural heritage, it has formulated a series of policies and guidelines for the “traditional culture of Intangible cultural heritage”, set up special projects of traditional culture of Intangible cultural heritage, increased investment in capital and personnel, and carried out large-scale and all-round collection and sorting of traditional culture of Intangible cultural heritage.

“Application for the first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage began in 2006, among which 6 Tibetan traditional dances were included, 12 were included in the second batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008, 12 were included in the third batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011, and 6 were included in the fourth batch of National Intangible Cultural Her-

itage in 2014. A total of 36 items were selected. In 2006, 12 traditional Tibetan dances were included in the first list of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Tibet Autonomous Region level, in 2008, 27 in the second, in 2009, 27 in the third, and in 2013, 29 in the fourth. In 2018, 19 were included in the second Tibet Autonomous Region-level intangible cultural Heritage list, a total of 114." (Tibet Autonomous Region, 2005) It can be seen from this that, among all the intangible cultural heritage items, Tibetan traditional dance occupies a relatively large proportion. The above measures fully reflect the great importance China attaches to traditional culture. The traditional culture itself has the complexity, in the inheritance aspect exists certain difficulty. In this way, many traditional dances that are about to be lost will be saved to the greatest extent, the outstanding cultural heritage of Tibetan dance will be protected, and the prosperity and development of Tibetan traditional dance will be promoted.

## Conclusion

Tibetan traditional dance is a combination of music, dance, religion, ritual, sacrifice and folk customs. It co-exists, spreads and develops with Tibetan traditional culture, and is the representative and benchmark of Tibetan traditional culture. Tibetan traditional dance is the product of dance art and national culture. It has a strong influence and vitality in the splendid national culture and has an indissoluble and irreplaceable position.

## References

Cai, X. J. (2017). Study on Xi Jinping's thought of cultural soft power. *New Oriental*, (6), 9.

Liu, Y. N. (2021). *Research on the Development of Dance Culture of Song and Dance Troupes in Tibet Autonomous Region* [Doctoral College of Art, Tibet University.

Tenzin, T. (2014). *Overview of Tibetan Folk Songs and Dances*. Nationalities Publishing House.

Jiang, D. (2017). On the Definition of the Identity of Tibetan Traditional Dance and its Development Direction. *Tibetan Art Studies*, (4), 59-60.

*Tibet Autonomous Region Nonitive Cultural Heritage Distort Dictionary*. (2005). Tibet People Publishing House.