

Comparative Evolution of Chinese Classical Dance and Russian Classical Ballet Training Systems: From Historical Roots to Distinctive Styles

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Abstract

The rich tapestry of dance history boasts myriad forms and styles, each with its own unique genesis, evolution, and cultural resonance. This paper undertakes a comparative study of the evolution of Chinese Classical Dance and Russian Classical Ballet training systems, two of the world's most revered dance traditions. Beginning with their historical roots, the study traces the paths of these systems through various epochs, social transformations, and cross-cultural influences. While Chinese Classical Dance emerged from ancient court performances and traditional folk tales, Russian Classical Ballet was shaped by the European Renaissance and the subsequent patronage of Russian elites. Originating from distinctive cultural, historical, and philosophical backgrounds, both dance forms have been developed and refined over centuries, leading to the establishment of rigorous training systems and pedagogies. This paper delves into a comprehensive exploration of the evolution of Chinese Classical Dance and Russian Classical Ballet training systems, tracing their historical roots to the formation of their unique styles. By juxtaposing these two dance traditions, this paper offers a unique perspective on the universality of human expression through dance and the distinctive features that cultural contexts and histories imbue upon it.

Keywords

Classical Dance, Classical Ballet, Ethnic Comparison, Training System, Art Style

1. Introduction

Dance, with its compelling fusion of movement and emotion, transcends lin-

guistic boundaries, inviting a rich tapestry of cultural expression that is as diverse as humanity itself. Its universality lies not merely in the shared experience of movement but in the nuanced stories it tells through the distinct lens of its cultural origins. Among the mosaic of dance forms, Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet stand as two pillars of the art, each deeply rooted in and reflective of their respective civilizations. Exploring these dance traditions is not just an academic exercise but a journey into the heart of the cultures they spring from. The persuasive evidence for the significance of tracing these roots lays in the profound ways dance shapes and is shaped by cultural identity, social structures, and historical contexts.

In choosing to juxtapose Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet, the rationale is anchored in the compelling contrast and convergence of their training systems, which are emblematic of their origins. While the two traditions have evolved under vastly different cultural skies—shaped by unique historical, social, and ethnic forces—they nonetheless exhibit fascinating parallels in their developmental trajectories. These similarities emerge distinctly through three primary stages: a period of historical accumulation informed by diverse cultural narratives, a phase of scientific refinement during the establishment of training methodologies, and a final stage of crystallizing a national identity that cements their unique aesthetic styles.

The main purpose of this exploration is to delve into the intricate relationship between dance and culture, and to understand how distinct training systems encapsulate the ethos of the societies from which they emerge. By examining the symbiotic growth of dance and cultural identity, we aim to shed light on the broader implications of the arts in the formation of national and ethnic self-conceptions. It is an inquiry into the ways in which the physical language of dance can reveal the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual currents that flow through the veins of a people. Through this comparative study, we endeavor to enrich our appreciation of these art forms and to celebrate the universal yet diverse language of dance that resonates across borders and generations.

2. Definition of Chinese Classical Dance and Russian Classical Ballet Training System

Both Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet belong to classical dance in the theoretical sense. Classical dance does not refer to “ancient dance”, because both Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet are constantly developing, changing and summarizing in the course of history. Classical dance refers to historical and exemplary dance art (Li, 2010: pp. 34-60). The training system of both of them not only contains the inherent classical flavor of culture, but also conforms to the law of the development of the art of the times, and makes great efforts in the training and cultivation of dance talents.

The Chinese classical dance training system is defined in the context of discipline construction. The Chinese classical dance training system is the result of

several comprehensive artistic objectives of Chinese dancers in the 1950s, such as establishing a national dance drama language, training dance drama performers, inheriting and carrying forward the essence of Chinese classical dance culture; incorporating the main sources of traditional Chinese opera dance, Chinese martial arts, Chinese Tai Chi rhythm, dance posture and movement styles, and drawing on the framework and scientific laws of the ballet teaching and training system to establish a contemporary training system of Chinese classical dance. Compared to ancient Chinese dance, Chinese classical dance is a product of contemporary dance art, which concentrates on the spirituality of the Chinese nation as a whole across the nature of the times. It inherits the classical flavor of the Ming and Qing dynasties opera dances, continues the artistic purport of the delicate and elaborate techniques of the ancient Chinese dance royal taste, and is culturally inherited to the Chinese nation. The Chinese classical dance training system was gradually developed and perfected against the background of the discipline building of the Department of Classical Dance at the Beijing Dance Academy. It is for this reason that the teaching materials and talent training programs of the Department of Classical Dance of the Beijing Dance Academy have become the basic standard and model of the Chinese classical dance training system.

The Russian ballet training system is in the third period in the history of ballet development. Compared with the first two periods, the classical ballet training system has further defined the program and training norms, with more outstanding achievements, forming the classical program of “pas de deux” and “character dance” of classical ballet. Petipa, the “father of classical ballet”, and Tchaikovsky, the Russian master of music, jointly created several classic ballet plays, which witnessed the exploration and innovation of ballet art since the 19th century. With the prosperity and development of ballet, the physical training system of ballet has gradually improved. “At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a series of teaching theory books were published, such as *Dramatic Dance Theory* by Adis, *Theory and Practice of Classical Dramatic Dance and Allegro in Classical Ballet* by Cecchetti, *Fundamentals of Classical Ballet* by Vaganova. In the book, dancers’ head, arms, upper body, legs, feet, facial expressions and overall dance posture are standardized, forming a relatively complete set of standard and standardized stylized training mode.” (Ma 2019: pp. 90-91) It was also after Cecchetti, Vaganova and a series of books were published that the terminology needed by ballet was standardized, marking the development of the ballet training system to a relatively mature stage. In 1738, Queen Anna approved the founding of the Petersburg Dance School (Global Times, 2019), which is also the predecessor of today’s Vaganova Dance Academy. Since then, choreographers and dance educators have gathered here and become an important base of today’s Russian school ballet. “The Vaganova method brought together the most dynamic and prominent features of the Italian and French schools, and draw on the valuable experience of the Russian classical

ballet school over the past 200 years, more integrated into the Russian national character characteristics, aesthetic taste and Vaganova's own pioneering spirit, outstanding achievements." (Wang, 2009: p. 78)

3. The Origin of the Harmonious Symbiosis between Chinese Classical Dance and Russian Ballet

Combining the introduction with the historical context, it becomes clear why Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet found a point of intersection during the early development of the former. In the grand narrative of dance, the story of Chinese classical dance is particularly fascinating, as it embodies a cultural renaissance and a strategic adaptation to the broader international milieu of the mid-20th century.

Chinese classical dance, as a formalized system, began to take shape during a period of significant cultural exchange and political realignment. In the early 20th century, China was in a state of profound transformation, moving from imperial rule to a republic and then grappling with the upheavals of civil conflict and the establishment of a new socialist state. Amidst this societal restructuring, there was a conscious effort by Chinese cultural leaders to forge a national identity that both embraced modernity and celebrated traditional heritage. The search for a synthesis that could embody the spirit of the Chinese people led to an openness to external influences that could complement and enrich indigenous traditions.

Russian classical ballet entered this picture as a beacon of technical excellence and structured pedagogy at a time when China was looking outward, seeking inspiration to cultivate its own artistic disciplines. The Soviet Union, with whom China shared ideological ties and political alliances during much of the mid-20th century, was also a global powerhouse in the arts, with ballet being one of its crown jewels. Russian ballet had already established itself as a supreme form of cultural expression with a comprehensive training system that had been refined over centuries.

The fusion of Chinese classical dance with Russian ballet techniques was not merely a coincidence of political alliances but a deliberate cultural strategy. It offered a path to rapidly elevate the technical prowess of Chinese dancers, infusing the discipline with a scientific approach to movement that Russian ballet exemplified. This cross-pollination was facilitated by the Soviet cultural influence and supported by exchanges of pedagogues and artists between the two nations. By incorporating the strengths of Russian ballet—its rigorous training methods, its emphasis on physical precision, and its rich theatricality—Chinese dance educators and choreographers sought to create a robust framework upon which the nuanced storytelling and aesthetics of traditional Chinese dance could thrive.

This integration during the formative years of Chinese classical dance training systems did not result in a mere replica of Russian ballet; instead, it led to a

unique hybrid that honored the legacy of Chinese performing arts while meeting the contemporary thirst for a more globally resonant form of expression. The blend of Russian structural discipline with the expressive movements and philosophical underpinnings of Chinese aesthetics allowed for a distinctive style to emerge—one that could stand on the world stage as a proud representation of China's cultural evolution and its dynamic engagement with the global community.

Thus, the intersection of Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet is a testament to the dynamic interplay between cultural self-assertion and international exchange. It illustrates how dance, as an art form, can serve as a bridge between traditions, fostering dialogue and mutual enrichment between distinct cultural identities.

4. Historical Evolution and Distinctive Formation of Chinese Classical Dance and Russian Classical Ballet Training Systems

The artistic tapestry of dance, as woven through history, reflects the cultural, societal, and historical contexts of its origin. The journey of Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet, as forms of artistic expression, has been deeply rooted in the histories and cultures of their respective nations. This section delves into the comparative transformation of these two renowned dance forms, shedding light on how they have developed their distinctive training systems over time. Through understanding their historical accumulation within varying cultural milieus, recognizing the periods of scientific borrowing that shaped their foundations, and acknowledging the subsequent stages where they each asserted their national identities, we gain deeper insights into the intricate interplay between culture, history, and art in dance.

4.1. The Stage of Historical Accumulation in Different Cultural Backgrounds

Both the Chinese classical dance training system and the Russian classical ballet training system have a long history of early dance art as their foundation, which makes them both classical in spirit and exemplary in terms of dance style and spiritual and cultural connotations. Chinese classical dance is a kind of extracting and extracting of the ancient Chinese dance, summarizing the classical spirit of the Chinese culture. The specific images of the operatic dance elements in this course can be traced back historically to the Ming and Qing dynasties. The Han and Tang dances in the style programme can be traced back to the Han dynasty. The Dwen Huang dances in the style programme can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty. In addition, the cultural origins of the Sword Dance, Sleeve Dance and Drum Dance of the prop dances can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period and earlier. The cultural accumulation of ancient Chinese dances was passed down spontaneously through folk popular art, collected and collated by the court musicians into the ancient court music and dances, and its national

aesthetic and aesthetic connotations over the centuries are also insightful in the dance vocabulary and dance forms of the Ming and Qing opera dances.

The achievement of contemporary ballet art in the world owes a great deal to the Russian ballet school, which pushes ballet art to a new peak in the world. Ballet originated in Renaissance Italy, flourished in France, and developed in Russia. In 1581, under the order of Louis, Queen of Henry the Thirtieth of France choreographed to celebrate the wedding of the Marquis of Ayez, the Paris court created and premiered the world's first ballet *The Queen's Comedy Ballet*. Since then, the word Ballet has been used to describe this form of dance. In the 16th century, ballet became popular among the French upper classes. Louis XIV's time, classical ballet began to separate from other artistic categories, and emerge as an independent art form with its own unique characteristics. It combines simple artistic plots, gorgeous and complicated dance steps and performance forms, gradually forms a unique movement system, aesthetic taste and technical norms. Louis XIV opened the Royal School of Dance to train professional performers. France became the world center of ballet in its early years. The ballet *Giselle* established the romantic school of French ballet. To improve the level of teaching and ballet art, the Czar hired western European ballet artists to Russia. Since the 1840s, foreign dancers frequently visited Russia, Marioni father and daughter, Perot, St. Leon and other people's performance and choreography activities, to the Russian dance circle taught the essence of France, Italy two dance schools, and gradually formed a new school, Russian dance school. From 1840, foreign dancers visited Russia frequently. Nearly 40 years after the Mariinsky theatre officially opened, the Russians have finally overtaken their French masters as the world's leaders in ballet. "At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian ballet has occupied a dominant position in the world of ballet and has its repertory, performance style and teaching system." (Mu, 2010: p. 117) This era put the burden of reviving ballet in Russian hands, and ballet began to radiate energy to the world from the Eurasian continent. "The development of Russian ballet schools has gone through different eras, and the prestige of traditional Russian ballet is due to the A Vaganova Ballet School in Leningrad. Vaganova's method of teaching had been formed and remained for more than two centuries." (Wu, 1994: p. 43)

4.2. The Stage of Scientific Borrowing during the Formation of the Training System

Ballet originated in Italy during the Renaissance, with the efforts of the French court, it gradually transformed into an independent dance art. After entering Russia, it gradually formed its Training system of Russian style. Ballet, as the representative classical dance of the West, has a mature training system and dance styles, including French schools, Danish schools, and Russian schools. The Russian school ballet training system is the most far-reaching ballet training system in the world today, and its influence even exceeds the ballet art category, it also has a significant influence on the establishment and development of the

Chinese classical dance training system.

The Chinese classical dance training system is based on the contemporary discipline of Chinese classical dance, and its aesthetic and cultural form and dance training system is the result of fusing the crystallization of classical aesthetic consciousness with contemporary scientific training techniques. After the founding of the New China, several generations of dancers have summarized and refined the essence of the spirit of Chinese classical dance culture in previous generations, as well as comprehensive extract of traditional Chinese art, combined with the scientific study and reference of the training system of Western ballet art, and gradually formed the training system of Chinese classical dance. The discipline of Chinese classical dance and its training system was gradually established after Soviet experts came to Beijing Dance Academy. Nowadays, there are many schools and types of Chinese classical dance, including body rhyme Classical dance, Han and Tang Classical dance, Dwen Huang Classical dance, Kwen dance and so on. The Chinese classical dance training system of other schools is from the same origin and different flow of the classical dance training system of body rhyme school, and it is also the most complete, scientific and influential classical dance teaching material nowadays. Therefore, the Chinese classical dance training system mentioned in this paper refers to the Chinese classical dance academic training system represented by the body rhythm school of Beijing Dance Academy.

It is worth provoking our thinking that both the construction of the Chinese classical dance training system and the construction of the Russian ballet training system cannot be separated from the guidance of foreign experts and the reference and absorption of other excellent crystallization of dance culture.

At the beginning of the Chinese classical dance training system, due to the exchanges between China and the Soviet Union, China invited Soviet dance experts to give lectures in China, and to assist our preparations for the Beijing Dance Academy, from the national culture level. Therefore, from the national cultural level, the Soviet Union's dance culture and dance development ideas influenced the early dance education in China, including the training system of Chinese classical dance. At the end of 1953, China invited Olga Alexandrina Irina, a Soviet dance expert and teacher of the Moscow Dance School, to guide the work in China. After Irina surveyed the current state of the Chinese dance, at the symposium, she introduced the Soviet Union's dance teaching and education ideas, experience and development track to the Chinese dance world. And she thinks it was urgent to solve the problem of professional dance teachers in Beijing Dance Academy to establish dance education, through the way of dance teacher training classes to speed up the training of the first batch of contemporary Professional dance education talents in China, to lay a foundation for the subsequent development of the Chinese dance training system. In September 1954, The Beijing Dance Academy had explicitly studied the Soviet model of dance teaching, with the basic standard of training well-rounded professional

dance talents, and the curriculum design was modeled on that of the Soviet dance schools. The Chinese classical dance training system learned the training steps, training processes and training principles of the classical ballet training system. This included the design of different area combinations of handle barre exercises, mid-space exercises, a partial to whole body training process, and the teaching of combination styles with piano accompaniment. The primary teaching objective was to develop disciplined, expressive dance performers who could perform the art of dance drama. From December 2, 1955, to the end of 1957, Beijing Dance Academy held the first dance choreographer class, with Victor Ivan chi Chaplin, an expert in Choreography from the Soviet Union and an actor of great merit from the Russian Republic, as the chief teacher. From 1958 to 1959, the Beijing Dance Academy held the second dance choreographer class, with PI Ann Gusev, an expert in dance performance teaching and choreography from the Soviet Union, as the chief teacher. Therefore, the results of the teaching of the Chinese classical dance training system, that is, the stage presentation of Chinese classical dance as a dance-drama language, cannot be achieved without the leadership of Soviet dancers. In the early days of the establishment of the Beijing Dance Academy, Soviet experts were directly involved in the creation of Chinese folk dance-dramas *Fish and Beauty* and *Lotus Lantern*, both of which drew on the performance art form of ballet. Soviet experts Chaplin and Gusev two masters also played an important role in the creation of the dance drama.

Since the second half of the 19th century, unlike the decline of ballet art in Western Europe, the Russian classical ballet has seen a rapid rise. On the one hand, a large number of classical productions emerged; on the other hand, the world tour of the Diaghilev Ballet stimulated a worldwide rebirth of the art of ballet and played a decisive role in the worldwide reputation of the Russian ballet school of dance. It has also played an extremely important role in the contemporary development of the French, English and American Ballet Schools. “Since the 18th century, European ballet masters have taught the Russian dance world the best of the three great schools of ballet, Italian, French and Danish, and at the end of the 19th century a new school, the Russian School of Ballet, gradually emerged. It was a system of rigorous teaching and simple performance that inherited the soft elegance of the French school, the enthusiasm of the Italian school and the difficult technique of the Danish school.” (Mu, 2010: p. 118) The Russian school took its cues from the French, Danish and Italian ballet schools, infusing them with its own style and gradually forming a complete and independent teaching system. In the 1930s, the publication of *Fundamentals of Classical Dance* by Vaganova and *Fundamentals of Classical Ballet Training* by Tarasov marked the maturation and standardization of the Russian ballet teaching system. The art of Russian ballet has always sought a balance between the poles of physical grace and strength. It has brought the art of Russian ballet to the world dance art exchange platform with its subtle body sculpting training and high technical impact. The Russian ballet training system, which benefits

from the world ballet art, ultimately feeds on it and even nourishes the contemporary development of the world dance art, including the Chinese classical dance training system.

4.3. The Stage of National Identity after the Establishment of a Distinctive Style

Both the classical ballet training system represented by the Vaganova ballet training system and the Chinese classical dance training system of the Beijing Dance Academy have gone through a long period of national identity after exploring and forming their own distinctive styles, and finally constitute a representative teaching material with a consensus based on a sense of national identity and national pride. The industry insider is more focused on professional recognition and evaluation of the dance training system for its actual training effects. However, for a nation, it is the national body, dance culture and aesthetic orientation of the training system that is the key to national identity.

“Since the integration of Chinese classical dance into the art of opera in the Ming and Qing dynasties, dance has shifted from a stand-alone art to a form more closely integrated with music. At the same time, dance in the art of Chinese opera has not only been preserved but has also created a deeper performance connection with Chinese martial arts and Chinese opera. In 1954, the Classical Dance Teaching and Research Group of the Beijing Dance Academy also attempted to combine Chinese opera dance with the aesthetic outlook and training methods of classical ballet, making opera dance break away from opera towards ‘Chinese Classical Dance’ the first step in the crossover was taken.” (Yu, 2017: p. 29)

Chinese classical dance, born from Chinese opera, is combined with the framework of the Russian ballet training system and a dance training system that incorporates Chinese martial arts and Chinese Tai Chi. With the body rhythm as its core, it has established a professional dance education and training system in the shortest possible time, while retaining the body rhythm and inner rhythm of classical Chinese dance, and drawing on the scientific teaching system, teaching curriculum design ideas and combination choreography programs of classical ballet. At the same time, it retains the important characteristics of the movement forms of classical Chinese dance, including the “counter-rhythm”, and takes into account the physical development of students in dance training, without departing from the national characteristics of Chinese dance art and the intrinsic character of classical Chinese dance. As a result, it has gained a sense of national psychological identity and a consensus in its professional pursuit.

“The art of Russian ballet in the 20th century belongs to Agrippina Yakofreva Vaganova, who, as the first dance professor in the Soviet Union, was hugely significant to the education of Russian classical ballet. In addition, world-class dancers such as Semyonova, Ulanova, Yordan, and Kolpakova, for example, created the glory of Russian ballet with their achievements. It can be said that

without Vaganova there would be no achievement of these outstanding world ballet masters. The achievements of these ballet masters have not only erected a monument to the art of ballet education for Vaganova but have also proved the effectiveness and practicality of her teaching method.” (Qiu, 2019: p. 33)

The Russian ballet training system, represented by the Vaganova system, has gained national identity firstly as a crystallization of the wisdom of the national art of dance, and secondly as an excellent educational tool for the art of ballet in other countries and regions of the world to study and learn from. Thus, the Russian nation’s sense of identity comes from the following aspects: Firstly, good ballet viewing habits have been formed among the people, and ballet art is an important part of people’s lives. The ballet performance is both an aesthetic and a social event for the people. Secondly, the Vaganova system is underpinned by the quality control of the Vaganova Dance School in terms of rigorous teaching and education. From the “entry” of teachers to the “exit” of students, there are very strict assessment criteria, which ensure the quality of teaching and the artistic standard of the work. Thirdly, it focuses on the opportunities for dance practice, following the pure style of classical ballet through rehearsals of classical dance excerpts. The Mariinsky Theatre rehearsal teachers are employed to rehearse important excerpts of Petipa and Gorsky’s works for the students. “After the formation of the Vaganova Method, it has been applied in two ways around the world: Firstly, the Vaganova Method has been inherited in its entirety, and the exploration of ballet teaching methods by later generations still falls within the scope of the Vaganova Method, and the two are inherited in the same source. Secondly, to draw on both the Vaganova method and other ballet teaching methods, and then to synthesize, develop and localize them.” (Wang, 2009: p. 79) Both the Chinese classical dance training system and the Russian ballet training system are based on the education, performance and creative practices of previous generations of dance artists, vertically absorbing the historical and cultural crystallization of their own dance, and horizontally absorbing the advanced experience of dance culture, especially dance education, of other ethnic groups, to find the most reasonable and efficient training methods and educational concepts for the inheritance and development of their own dance.

5. Conclusion

Dance, as an expressive art form, serves not just as a testament to human creativity, but also as a mirror reflecting the societal, historical, and cultural nuances of its place of origin. The intricate journey of Chinese classical dance and Russian classical ballet training systems reveals the multifaceted influences that have sculpted them. From their early stages of historical accumulation, steeped in rich cultural traditions, to the periods of scientific borrowing, where external influences were seamlessly integrated, these dance forms have shown resilience, adaptability, and a constant evolution. Most importantly, the establishment of their distinctive styles, anchored in a strong sense of national identity, unders-

cores the powerful connection between art and nationhood. Through this comparative exploration, one recognizes that while dance forms might have diverse roots, the processes of evolution, adaptation, and self-assertion are universal narratives in the world of art. This not only celebrates the unique identities of each dance form but also underscores the shared human endeavor to tell stories, express emotions, and capture history through the graceful movement of dance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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