

The Romantic and Elegant Chu Dance

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Abstract: Chu Dance, this ancient art of dance, has its origins traceable back to the Chu region during the Pre-Qin period, and it reached its peak during the Qin and Han dynasties, mainly popular in the Jingchu area and its surrounding regions. It not only carries the solemnity of religious rituals but also contains the joy of entertainment, representing a complex cultural and artistic phenomenon that integrates various forms of dance, including Sacrificial Dance, Drum Dance, the Dance of Kindness and Heroic Dance. Chu Dance has developed into numerous varieties, characterized by long sleeves and a slender waist, as well as a romantic and elegant style, profoundly influencing the dances of later generations.

Keywords: Chu Dance; Worship; Romanticism.

1. The Development History of Chu Dance

1.1. Primitive Dance in Ancient Times

Primitive dance was rich in religious overtones, with ancient people often using dance to communicate with and entertain deities during religious ceremonies and shamanic activities. In ancient times, there was no distinction between martial arts and dance, nor between shamans and dancers. Shamans could be considered highly skilled dancers, using dance to interact with spirits and deities. In Chu Dance, the Sacrificial Dance is centered around the worship of deities and the seeking of blessings from spirits, a form of dance imbued with a strong atmosphere of shamanism.

1.2. Chu Music and Dance of the Pre-Qin period

1.2.1. Inheritance and Development

During the Pre-Qin period, the dance culture of the Chu had a close connection with the music and dance system of the Western Zhou Dynasty.

During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the courtly system of elegant music gradually took shape, including various forms of dance such as the Music and Dance of Six Dynasties, Six Small Dances and Yi Dance, with the Music and Dance of Six Dynasties being the most important. The Music and Dance of Six Dynasties is a form of dance used by emperors of successive dynasties to commemorate their achievements. It aims to praise leaders who unified the realm through both civil and military prowess and is a large-scale song and dance performance with a ceremonial nature. In addition to the Music and Dance of Six Dynasties, there were specially formulated the Six Small Dances which served as dance textbooks for the nobility's offspring, as well as the "Yi Wu" that originated from folk and ethnic minorities. These dances not only enriched the musical and dance culture of the Western Zhou Dynasty but also had a profound influence on the dance art of the Chu during the Pre-Qin period, especially in court dances. For example, dances such as "Yunmen" (also known as "Xianchi" and "Chengyun"), "Shao" and "Dawu" from the Music and Dance of Six Dynasties were particularly favored by the people of Chu. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, "Yunmen" was a dance and music used for the worship of heavenly deities, and in the Chu, it also existed as

a prestigious festival of dance and music. "Dawu" was exclusively enjoyed by the Zhou royal family and the Duke of Lu, who was a descendant of the Duke of Zhou, during the Western Zhou Dynasty. During the Spring and Autumn period, the people of Chu had absorbed "Dawu" from the Zhou people and included it in their own tradition. The Chu during the Pre-Qin period was renowned for its martial prowess, hence the Chu people not only inherited and favored "Dawu" but also must have performed it with great splendor.

The Chu was deeply influenced by the music and dance culture of the Western Zhou Dynasty in the field of dance art, adopting the Western Zhou Dynasty's education system for music and dance, as well as the associated etiquette and institutions. For example, "Li Sao" records "the jingling of jade pendants," and "Jiu Ge" depicts "In the evening I halt my oars at the northern islet", "I cast my jade into the river, leave my pendants at the Li waters". These descriptions refer to the Chu people memorizing music and dance steps while walking or driving, simultaneously creating harmonious rhythms with the sound of carriage bells and jade ornaments on their bodies, a custom similar to that of the Western Zhou Dynasty.

1.2.2. Innovative Development

The depictions of music and dance in the "Chu Ci" during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods confirm that the Chu Dance art system was inclusive of foreign cultures, striving for innovation. In "Chu Ci" the Zheng Dance is mentioned. When combined with Chu Dance, the Zheng Dance had already integrated the styles and characteristics of Chu Dance. This integration not only reflects the regional features of Chu Dance but also demonstrates the inclusiveness and integrative capacity of Chu Culture towards foreign dances.

In Chu, the "passing of the ox tail" in sacrificial ceremonies was a typical form of the "Dai Dance" in the Yin and Shang culture, while in Chu, this tradition evolved into the "passing of flowers," reflecting the adaptability and innovative spirit of Chu art.

1.3. Chu Style in the Dance of the Two Han Period

Dance of the Han Dynasty, building upon the styles of the pre-Qin Chu Dance, developed a characteristic dance form featuring long sleeves and a slender waist, along with a style that is elegant and gentle. This dance style dominated

throughout the Two Han period, reflecting the profound influence of Chu Dance on Han Dynasty dance.

The Han Dynasty's tombs in Xinye, Henan, unearthed a lively dance scene depicted on a painted brick from Nanyang, Henan (see Figure 1). The portrait depicts a female dancer with her hair coiled high in a bun, dressed in a light, long-sleeved dance costume that reveals her slender neck and delicate waist. Her arms are raised high, and the sleeves billow with her movements. Around her feet are placed six upside-down plates, with one foot stepping on a drum surface, as if she is lightly hopping between beats. Her movements are swift and her dance steps agile, displaying a dance posture that is both light and graceful, with long sleeves and skirt hems fluttering along with her dance. In the bottom right corner of the image, there is a male dancer accompanying the female, half-naked, kneeling on one knee, extending one arm, and looking up at the female dancer. Above the scene are depicted wine vessels and a ding (ancient Chinese cauldron), details that suggest the painted brick portrays a dance and music performance at a Han Dynasty noble's banquet.



Figure 1. Han Dynasty Nanyang Painted Brick with Sleeve Dance



Figure 2. Dance on Tray and Drum and Acrobatics on a Painted Brick

During the Western Han period, the official institution in charge of music and dance, known as the Han Prefecture, carried out the significant responsibility of collecting and organizing folk music.

The inheritance of Chu Dance in the Han Dynasty is particularly evident, with Jian Gu Dance being the most common. An object was unearthed in Taiping Township, Pengzhou City, Sichuan (see Figure 2), which is the "Dance on Tray and Drum and Acrobatics Portrait Brick". The image

on the right side depicts a female dancer with double buns, holding a long scarf, dancing on a drum. The image depicts a female dancer with double buns, holding a long scarf, dancing on a drum. Beneath her feet are seven inverted plates, with two drums placed among them. The dancer's movements are agile and her dance steps are nimble, displaying an elegant dance posture, with long sleeves and skirt hems fluttering along with her dance. In the upper left corner of the image, there are twelve overlapping cases displayed, with a female dancer wearing double buns performing a high-difficulty "reverse bow" movement on the case. This not only showcases the dancer's flexibility but also reflects the superb dance skills of the Han Dynasty.

2. Types of Chu Dance

2.1. Sacrificial Dance

Archaeologists have found that the earliest dancers were actually shamans serving as religious officials. In the "Shuo Wen Jie Zi", the explanation of "shaman" is "one who invokes the gods through dance". The Chu has always had a tradition of "respecting deities and valuing shamans", making Sacrificial Dance very popular. The main purpose of Sacrificial Dance is to worship deities and seek the protection of spirits, which carries a strong religious significance.

Ancient texts also reflect the profound culture of Sacrificial Dance in the Chu. In ancient texts, the profound culture of Sacrificial Dance in the Chu is indeed reflected. As recorded in "Guo Yu": "In ancient times, people and gods did not mix. Those among the people who were pure in spirit and not divided in heart, and who could be solemn and sincere, their wisdom could compare the righteousness of heaven and earth, their sanctity could illuminate and proclaim far and wide, their brightness could light up, their ears could hear through. Thus, the deities would descend upon them; in males, they were called xi (覡), and in females, they were called wu (巫)". This indicates that the shaman played an essential role in Chu Culture, and Sacrificial Dance became an important tool for the people of Chu to express their wishes and respect to the deities. The portrait of a dancer on the inscribed Yan Le oval cup in the Shanghai Museum collection (Figure 3) indeed displays the characteristics of long sleeves and a curved body posture. According to the records in "Jiu Ge", the accompaniment of Sacrificial Dance primarily features drum music. Shamans, dressed in splendid attire, would sing and dance in response to the varying tempos of the drumbeats. The descriptions correspond with the image of the dancer on the oval cup, reflecting the beautiful and rotating characteristics of Chu Dance.



Figure 3. Inscriptions on the Yan Le Portrait Cup in the Shanghai Museum

2.2. Drum Dance

Wang Yi recorded in "Chu Ci Zhang Ju": "In the past, in the southern counties of the Chu, between Yuan and Xiang, the local customs believed in ghosts and favored sacrifices. During these sacrifices, they must perform singing, music, and Drum Dance to entertain the deities". Indeed, it indicates that the people of Chu believed in ghosts and deities, had a fondness for sacrificial rituals, and would inevitably include singing, music, and drum dancing to entertain the gods in their sacrificial activities. This custom reflects the popularity of Drum Dance in the Chu, a form of sacrificial dance primarily accompanied by drums, with female shamans singing and dancing to the rhythm of the drumbeats.

The drumming scene can be seen on the Eastern Zhou Mandarin Duck-shaped Lacquered Box unearthed from Marquis Yi of Zeng's tomb in Sui County, Hubei (Figure 4). On both sides of the mandarin duck's belly, within the rectangular areas delineated by twisted patterns and red lines, scenes of warriors dancing to the drum and mythical beasts striking bells with sticks are depicted. These patterns provide us with valuable information about the playing methods of Bianzhong and ancient music and dance scenes.

During the Han Dynasty, the Jian Gu Dance was primarily performed in a form of paired dancing, where two individuals danced while playing the drum, showcasing a high level of skill and difficulty. From the Drum Dance in Chu to the Jian Gu Dance in the Han Dynasty, we can see the development and progress of drum dance art in different historical periods.

2.3. The Dance of Kindness

The dance of kindness is a performance by dancers holding props such as streamers and feathers, accompanied by the music of feathered flutes.

In ancient texts, there are detailed descriptions of the dance of kindness. The "Zhou Li" mentions: "In charge of teaching the national children to dance with feathers and yue". Zheng Xuan in his commentary on "Zhou Li" further elaborates: "In the the dance of kindness, there are those who hold feathers and blow the yue, which is called the yue dance". The records indeed indicate that the the dance of kindness (文舞) included two forms: Mao Dance (旄舞) and Feather Dance (羽舞). Mao Dance (旄舞) uses the tail of a cow as a prop, while Yu Dance (羽舞) uses the feathers of birds. The records indeed indicate that the the dance of kindness (文舞), with its strong ceremonial character, was also regarded as a religious dance.



Figure 4. Eastern Zhou Mandarin Duck-shaped Lacquered Box

2.4. Heroic Dance

The opposite of "the dance of kindness" is "Heroic Dance", also known as "Dawu", in which performers wield axes and

shields. This dance mainly serves to praise the military exploits of the rulers and is often used in important ceremonies such as sacrificial rites, court congratulations, and banquets.

In ancient documents, descriptions of Heroic Dance often relate to military scenes. "Rites" records "Zhu Gan Yu Qi, Mian Er Wu Da Wu". "Lüshi Chunqiu" records: "When King Wu ascended to the throne, he led the six armies to attack the Yin dynasty. Before the six armies arrived, he defeated them with elite troops at Muye. Upon returning... he ordered the Duke of Zhou to compose the 'Da Wu'". The "Dawu" dance is a work created by the Zhou people to commemorate the victory in war, and its creative prototype is closely related to the Ba people. "Huayang Guo Zhi" records that when King Wu of Zhou fought against King Zhou of Shang, he received the help of the Ba and Shu forces, with the Ba forces being renowned for their bravery and sharpness. They used song and dance in battle to demoralize the Shang troops, leading to the front ranks of the Shang army turning their coats. The Ba people's elements of song and dance were later adopted by the Zhou people and incorporated into the "Dawu" music, making "Dawu" not only a musical and dance work celebrating King Wu's victory over King Zhou of Shang, but also integrating the cultural characteristics of the Ba people.

3. Characteristics of Chu Dance

3.1. Long Sleeves and Slender Waist: Morphological Features

Chu Dance is renowned for its graceful and flowing beauty, as well as its rich romantic colors, which stand in stark contrast to the solemn, elegant, and austere style of Central Plains court dances. The artistic beauty and romantic hues of Chu Dance reflect the uniqueness and diversity of Chu Culture, securing its significant place in the development of ancient Chinese dance.

According to the research by Fei Bingle, one of the characteristics of Chu Dance is its elegance, which is primarily reflected through the use of long sleeves; the second characteristic is its softness, which is demonstrated by the skillful movements of the waist; additionally, the dance costumes place a great emphasis on splendor and beauty. Indeed, the long sleeves and slender waist are the fundamental forms of Chu Dance, which also became the basic customs and aesthetic perspective in the Chu region.

The unearthed cultural relics indeed explicitly demonstrate the aesthetic form of Chu people's dance, such as the Warring States jade dance figurine unearthed from the Zhou tombs in Jin Village, Luoyang (Figure 5), which showcases the characteristics of the attire and body form of that period. The jade dance figure pendant from the Warring States period, unearthed in Jin Village, Luoyang, features a dancer's attire with long and narrow sleeves, and the sleeve cuffs are decorated similarly to the water sleeves found in later opera costumes.

3.2. Free and Romantic Stylistic Features

The Chu Dance, nurtured from Chu Culture, naturally carries certain characteristics of Chu Culture. In terms of its main forms and morphological features, Chu Dance should generally possess stylistic traits such as mystery and romance, freedom and exaggeration, and passion and exuberance. The formation of the mysterious and romantic style characteristics of Chu Culture was deeply influenced by the local veneration

of shamanism. The free exaggeration in Chu Dance is, from the perspective of Chu Culture, a result of the innovative spirit endowed upon it. Chu Dance is famous for its warm and unrestrained style, which reflects its rich diversity in artistic expression. At slower rhythms, the dancers display a soft and elegant beauty, adept at expressing inner emotions; while at faster rhythms, they exhibit a bold style with primitive charm.



Figure 5. The Warring States period Jade Dancer Pendant

4. Conclusion

As a treasure of Chu Culture, Chu Dance not only integrates the solemnity and mystery of religious rituals but also contains rich cultural and artistic connotations, holding an important position in ancient Chinese dance.

The style and form of Chu Dance are closely connected to the natural environment, social culture, and philosophical thoughts of the Chu region. Chu Dance, with its long sleeves and slender waist form along with its free and romantic style,

showcases the Chu people's pursuit of beauty and worship of nature. Dancers in Chu Dance play the role of connecting humans with deities, reflecting the Chu people's reverence for supernatural forces and veneration of the divine.

As a cultural symbol, Chu Dance continues to be passed down and developed, regaining vitality in new forms of art.

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