

# RESEARCH ON THE VALUE OF REPRESENTATIVE FOLK DANCE LANGUAGE IN SHANXI, CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

As a product of the combined influence of Shanxi's geographical culture and humanistic culture, Shanxi's representative folk dances not only occupy an important position in China's Han folk dance, but is also an important expression tool for Shanxi people to express emotions, entertain and communicate. From ancient times to the present, after thousands of years of development, Shanxi's representative folk dances are still able to stand the test of time and the people and are still active on the current stage. However, in both classroom teaching and stage performances, contemporary Shanxi folk dances tend to focus only on external forms, while the cultural connotations behind their movement language are easily overlooked. The emergence of this problem will make it difficult to clearly distinguish the style characteristics of Shanxi's representative folk dances, and the phenomenon of similarity will appear. Therefore, this research employs the ethnographic research method to collect and analyze data. It examines the specific cultural connotations of the movements, roles, music, and props in representative folk dance languages of Shanxi. It reveals the value of representative folk dances of Shanxi in contemporary social life and provides theoretical references for the protection and sustainable development of these folk dances.

**Keywords:** Language, Representative folk dances of Shanxi, Shanxi Province, Value Research, Ethnography

## INTRODUCTION

Shanxi Province is the name of a province in China. It is located in the most central part of China, shown in Figure 1. In terms of provincial location, it is closely connected with China's Shaanxi Province, Hebei Province, Henan Province and Inner Mongolia Province, shown in Figure 2. From a geographical perspective, Shanxi Province is located in the eastern part of the middle reaches of the Yellow River, west of the Taihang Mountains, and east of the Loess Plateau in China. It is characterized by a mountainous terrain with few plains, and the altitudes of its mountains vary significantly: the highest point reaches 3061 meters (on Wutai Mountain in Xinzhou City), while the lowest point is 180 meters above sea level (in Yuanqu County, Yuncheng City) (Sun, Niu, Zhang, & Shao, 2017). Due to the complex and diverse geographical location of Shanxi Province, and the influence of geographical location, climatic conditions and hydrological conditions, there is a significant temperature difference between the southern and northern regions of Shanxi Province. The southern part of Shanxi Province belongs to the warm temperate climate zone, the central part of Shanxi Province belongs to the warm temperate to mid-temperate transition climate zone, and the northern part

of Shanxi Province belongs to the mid-temperate climate zone. In Shanxi Province, where the environment is complex and diverse, there are different geographical landscapes within the same province, which also forms representative folk dances with different styles and characteristics.



Figure 1: Map of provinces in China (Baidu,2018)



**Figure 2:** Map of Shanxi Province (Baidu,2021)

As a vital repository of regional culture, Shanxi folk dance is notable for its remarkable diversity and extensive distribution, thriving not only in urban centers but also being deeply embedded within towns and villages. According to the survey data compiled in *The Collection of Chinese National and Folk Dances: Shanxi Volume* (1993), a total of 234 distinct types of folk dances has been documented in the province. This substantial repertoire provides a robust foundation for selecting representative subjects for this research.

This paper defines "representative folk dances" as those possessing distinct stylistic features and identifiable regional cultural significance, thereby ensuring the typicality and relevance of the research subjects. Based on the screening criteria established by Ji (2012), three core selection principles were adopted: first, indigenous origin, meaning the dance form originated within the cultural context of Shanxi and is not an external import; second, formal integrity, requiring that the dance's performance structure, movement vocabulary, and cultural elements are well-preserved without loss of core characteristics; and third, stylistic typicality, referring to the capacity to reflect the cultural traits and aesthetic orientations of a specific region. Based on the geographical zoning characteristics of Shanxi Province, the final

selection of core research objects was made for the Jinan area's *Jinan Drum Dance*, the *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi* in the Jinzhong area, and the *Ti Guzi Yangge* in the Jinbei area. These three forms respectively carry the regional cultural genes of Jinan, Jinzhong, and Jinbei, and have strong representativeness and research value (Tian, 2004).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As vital expressions of regional culture, folk dance research is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing significantly on cultural anthropology and dance studies. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, theoretical frameworks such as Geertz's "thick description" (1973) and Malinowski's functionalism (1922) provide a core lens for interpreting the cultural significance of dance. These approaches shift the focus from mere description of movement to the interpretation of meaning, emphasizing the intrinsic connections between dance, community life, and folk beliefs. Within the field of dance studies, a multifaceted research paradigm encompassing ontology, cultural context, and transmission has emerged. Alva Noë's theory of action and perception (2004) offers a pathway for analyzing dance's ontology by deconstructing its constituent movements, symbolic codes, and cultural meanings. Luo (2001) proposed the theory of dynamic inheritance, which focuses on the inheritance mechanism and development challenges of folk dance, and has become a core theoretical support for the research on intangible cultural heritage protection.

Domestic research on folk dances can generally be classified into three categories. The first is morphological analysis, which focuses on documenting and classifying the external forms of dance, including movements, music, and costumes. A foundational work is *The Collection of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dances: Shanxi Volume* (1993), which systematically cataloged the morphological characteristics of 234 folk dances in Shanxi, providing a crucial database for subsequent studies. The second strand involves the interpretation of cultural connotations. This approach contextualizes dance within its regional culture to elucidate its social functions and spiritual significance. For instance, Yuan and Wang (2017) examined the sacrificial functions of Shanxi folk dances from the perspective of agricultural culture. The third strand addresses preservation and transmission, focusing on the challenges folk dances face due to urbanization and modernization. Scholars in this area propose protective strategies, such as policy support and integration into cultural industries, to ensure their sustainability (Deng, 2015).

Current research on Shanxi's representative folk dances has yielded fruitful outcomes. However, a systematic literature review reveals persistent theoretical gaps, particularly a tendency toward superficial interpretation of cultural connotations. Many studies remain at the level of establishing macroscopic connections between dance and regional culture, lacking a deeper deconstruction of specific dance language and its embedded significance (Fu, 2024). A case in point is the research on the *Jinan Drum Dance*, *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi*, and *Ti Guzi Yangge*, excessive emphasis has been placed on its connection with the farming culture of Shanxi, while the metaphorical meanings of specific movement symbols have not been interpreted through in-depth description. Moreover, the physical experiences and experiential narratives of the inheritors have not been incorporated, resulting in an interpretation that is divorced from the dance itself and the inheritance practice. As a result, it is difficult to reveal the complexity and uniqueness of the cultural connotations. (Liu, 2025).

Secondly, the analysis of the causes underlying homogenization and inheritance discontinuity remains insufficient (Ding, 2024). Existing studies have pointed out problems encountered by representative folk dances in Shanxi, such as the homogenization of performance forms across different stages and the low level of enthusiasm among young people for inheriting these art forms. However, the causes are often attributed to the impact of modernization, lacking a critical analysis of the underlying factors. For instance, it fails to explore the erosion of the core symbols of dance due to over-commercialization and the

influence of the absence of indigenous dance culture in the education system on audience cultivation. As a result, the proposed protection suggestions lack pertinence and operability.

In response to the aforementioned research gaps, this study aims to achieve breakthroughs and expansions in the following aspects. It endeavors to deepen the multi-dimensional interpretation of cultural connotations. Specifically, it will not only deconstruct and interpret cultural metaphors through movement symbols but also combine the experiential narratives and physical experiences of inheritors to achieve an in-depth understanding of cultural connotations and avoid superficial interpretations. Strengthen the critical analysis of the causes of the problem. Combine with on-the-spot research data to conduct an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes of homogenization and heritage inheritance disruption. Pay attention to both the external environment and internal factors, so as to provide theoretical support for formulating precise and effective protection strategies. In summary, this study aims to deepen the academic understanding of the language of representative folk dances in Shanxi and provide more targeted theoretical references for the living inheritance and sustainable development of these representative folk dances in Shanxi.

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher will employ the ethnographic research method within the qualitative research approach to conduct analysis and exploration (Liu, 2016). Because dance is not merely a fixed physical behavior pattern of a certain group of people. Dance can reveal a series of comprehensive factors, such as the class, gender, and ethnicity of the people in that region. Ethnography not only enables us to observe the geographical features of a region, but also enables us to deeply understand the lifestyle of the people in that region (Liu, 2016). The representative folk dances of Shanxi vividly reflect the consciousness of the people in various regions of Shanxi. Through the ethnographic research method, researcher can understand the specific inner meanings of the language of the representative folk dances of Shanxi from its unique culture. The following presents the specific implementation path for the research.

### Field investigation research

Research scope and subjects: Three representative dance forms were selected, namely the *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi* in Jinzhong, the *Ti Guzi Yangge* in the northern part of Shanxi, and the *Jinnan Drum Dance* in the southern part of Shanxi. A total of 19 individuals were surveyed, including traditional arts inheritors, veteran artisans, young inheritors, and grassroots backbone figures. The survey aimed to balance the integrity of the inheritance lineage and the diversity of the group.

### Duration of the research

The phased immersive research lasted for 8 months and covered the daily training of the three types of dances, folk performances, and festival showcases. Ensured the capture of the dance presentation forms in different cultural contexts.

### Method of data collection

Data collection is carried out through observation, recording and interview methods. This includes: Audio-visual recording: collecting materials such as dance performances, action details and the atmosphere on the spot; Participatory observation: the researcher integrates as an edge participant into the inheritance group to record tacit knowledge and practical logic; Structured and semi-structured interviews: conducting in-depth interviews with experienced artists, collecting information around core topics such as the essence of the dance, cultural connotations, inheritance and development, and social functions, and forming the interview content.

Literature analysis logic: Starting from tracing the origin, categorizing, and establishing the connection path, the historical context and regional background of dance are systematically explored. Through encoding based on the subject, connotation, and function, the mutual verification relationship between the literature and the field research data is established, providing multiple supports for the argument.

## **Data Analysis Technique**

Using the technique that combines mixed coding analysis and symbolic deconstruction (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990), the process is as follows: Primary coding (open coding): Extract key information from the original data and form initial coding labels. Secondary coding (central coding): Classify and integrate according to three major categories: dance ontology, cultural connotation, and inheritance practice, to form secondary coding. Tertiary coding: Centered around the core research topic, extract core analytical dimensions such as the regional adaptability of movement symbols. Final deconstruction of dance symbols: By applying the theory of body movement semiotics, the morphological characteristics and cultural metaphors of the core movements are interpreted.

The theoretical analysis framework constructed in this study integrates the entire research process into a clear theoretical system, achieving a deep integration of theory and methods. Theoretical support comes from cultural anthropology. The core of this is Clifford Geertz's detailed description theory and Malinowski's cultural functional theory. Shanxi folk dance is regarded as an integral part of the regional cultural system. On the one hand, by using the deep description method to interpret the cultural significance behind the dance movements and performance processes, we avoid superficial descriptions. On the other hand, from the perspective of cultural functions, we analyze the role of dance in consolidating group identity, transmitting folk beliefs, and regulating social relationships, revealing its intrinsic connection with geographical environment, production and lifestyle, and folk traditions, and providing a macro cultural context framework for research.

Theoretical support for the discipline of dance. Establish an ontology, develop a detailed theoretical system for the inheritance of cultural elements, and enhance the in-depth application of theories within the discipline. Dance semiotics draws on Noë's theory of action symbols to establish an analytical path for analyzing action elements, symbol encoding and cultural significance, accurately interpreting the symbolic representation of dance movements. Folk dance cultural studies, with the theory of dynamic inheritance as its core, analyzes the inheritance models, inheritance dilemmas and development paths of representative folk dances in Shanxi, highlighting the cultural attributes of folk dances.

The above theoretical framework is not isolated but rather mutually complementary and organically integrated. Cultural anthropology offers a macroscopic perspective for cultural analysis, while the theory of dance discipline delves into the micro level of the dance itself and the body experience, forming a multi-level analytical system at the macro, meso and micro levels, ensuring that the research has both cultural breadth and theoretical depth as well as practical precision. By combining the theoretical framework with the ethnographic method, the aim is to systematically analyze the action language system of representative folk dances in Shanxi, deeply revealing the cultural connotations and value concepts hidden behind them, and providing theoretical support for the dynamic inheritance and innovative development of folk dances.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Characteristics of Shanxi's representative folk dance language under the influence of geographical environment

Jinnan of Shanxi Province is located in the southern part of Shanxi Province. The geographical environment of the folk-dance region in southern Shanxi is characterized by basins and rivers. It belongs to the warm temperate zone and has relatively scarce water resources (Hu & Zheng, 2014). Due to the flat terrain and many rivers, the local people rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Owing to the flat terrain and dense river network, the local residents make a living from agriculture. The development of agricultural culture has facilitated the extensive dissemination and exchange of *Drum Dances* associated with it in this area. Jinzhong is located in the central part of Shanxi. Jinzhong is located in the central part of Shanxi Province. The geographical environment of the central folk-dance region is characterized by an interlacing of mountains and basins, and it belongs to a transitional water - scarce area in the mid - temperate zone. The most well - known folk dance in this area is *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi*. The folk-dance area in northern Shanxi is located in the region where mountains and basins alternate in the northern part of Shanxi Province. It has a higher elevation than the southern and central parts of the province, belongs to the mid - temperate zone, and suffers from a shortage of water resources. The *Ti Guzi Yangge* is a representative folk dance in northern Shanxi Province (Suo, 2025).

#### Rhythm characteristics

Based on feedback from folk artists, in the southern region of Shanxi Province, influenced by drum - related props and for the purpose of emotional catharsis, when the upper limbs hold the drums with both hands and make large - scale movements, the lower limbs must strive to maintain body stability. Therefore, people in the southern region of Shanxi Province believe that adopting a squatting or semi - squatting posture as the basic body position for exerting force, changing movements, and moving is more stable. The Jinzhong region. Owing to the rugged mountainous terrain in this area, the lower limbs tend to bounce and sway during walking. Dancers incorporate the rhythmic movement patterns of such bouncing and swaying from daily life into their performances. In the northern region of Shanxi Province, influenced by the local climate and heavy clothing, dancers tend to reduce the amplitude of arm movements in the upper body to keep warm. The primary rhythm of their movements is characterized by the elastic forward and backward kicking motions of the lower - body legs.

#### Movement characteristics



**Figure 3:** Representative folk dance of Shanxi-Jinnan Drum Dance (Chen Donghui, 2018)



**Figure 4:** Representative folk dance of Shanxi *Jinnan Drum Dance* (Baidu, 2018)

In the southern region of Shanxi Province, the terrain is flat and expansive, and the climate is temperate. As a result, the local residents mainly make a living through agriculture. To celebrate the harvest, they pray for favorable weather and bountiful crops in the coming year (Wei, 2013). The torso movements imitate the most region - specific gestural language of the people in southern Shanxi, characterized by shoulder shrugging, neck retracting, and body curling. The upper - limb movements are coordinated with the drumbeats. The hands perform drumming actions such as pushing, pulling, circling, and striking. The lower - limb movements mainly include kneeling, bending forward, adopting a horse - riding stance, stepping, and lunging (Liu, 2017). By focusing on grassroots efforts and maintaining a down-to-earth approach, this project showcases the charm of those who toil diligently on the loess land.

For instance, the dance *Huang Tu Huang* embodies a national spirit. There is a segment in this dance without music. All the male actors on the stage first sucked in their stomachs, stood at attention, and rapidly beat the drums. Subsequently, they vigorously waved their arms up and down and swayed their upper bodies back and forth to a great extent. Then, the music started, and the body opened and closed more and more. The physical space transitions from a crouching position on the ground, to standing upright, and then leaping into the air. The arms strike the drumheads under the action of a rapid and continuous force. The performers shout repeatedly for more than ten times. This powerful force vividly portrays the vibrant energy of the people in southern Shanxi on the loess land. In another scenario, a dancer kneels on the ground, holds up the loess with both hands, and looks up at the sky with tearful eyes. This makes people seem to understand the culture and emotions that the creator attempts to convey to us through the dance: As long as the loess remains, humanity will not perish! In brief, the drum is a symbol of the spirit, the dance is an embodiment of strength, and the combination of the drum and the dance is a vivid manifestation of the national spirit.



**Figure 5:** Representative folk dance of Shanxi - Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi(Qiao Xiaoyun, 2024)



**Figure 6:** Representative folk dance of Shanxi - Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi(Qiao Xiaoyun, 2024)

Jinchong Region. As this region is located at the intersection of the mountainous area where *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi* is popular and the basin, influenced by its geographical features, the local people are accustomed to walking with a bumpy and swaying gait in their daily lives (Gao, 2019). Therefore, the *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi* incorporates leg movements from daily life into its performances. A prominent characteristic of the lower - body movements is that the knees need to tremble up and down, driving the heels and transmitting the movement

to the soles of the feet to complete the actions. Subsequently, influenced by the *Wuxiang Yangge* and local operas, the veteran folk artists in the countryside began to explore how to better coordinate the changes of the fans with the movements of the feet and upper body to attract the favor of capitalists and officials. This enriches the upper - limb movements and the use of fans (Gao, 2019). Researchers use the following examples to explain the recurring movements in the crucial parts of *Zuoquan Xiaohua* Dance, aiming to gain a clearer understanding of the movement characteristics of representative folk dances in the Jinzhong region.

**Ca Pu Fan** (Chinese translation Ca Pushan). Action description: Insert three fingers of the right hand into the fan, or grasp the fan with all five fingers. Position the fan so that its surface is close to the chest and its tip points upward. Then, hold the fan and make circular motions in front of the chest. It is a fan technique used by men and women to express affection for each other in traditional flower operas, and it is often used in conjunction with the *Hu Suo* steps.

**Hu Suo Step.** During preparation, step forward with the right leg and gently press down on the heel. Then, take a small step forward with the left leg while evenly and rapidly bending and straightening the knee to make the whole-body tremble. Subsequently, perform this set of movements alternately. Dance one step for each beat. Shake at least three times for each step. Twist your body naturally with the dance steps. Swing your hands and arms back and forth alternately at the sides of your body. Typically, a *Ca Pu* fan is used in combination to showcase the purity and shyness of girls. The men take relatively large steps in the *Hu Suo* dance step. Holding a closed fan, they swing it alternately above their heads while their upper bodies twist significantly back and forth, fully demonstrating the masculinity of boys.

**San Dian Step.** Based on the *Husuo* step, the supporting leg trembles at the knee three times in place. The moving leg completes the movement by lifting the leg twice and kicking it up once. The two legs can alternately serve as the supporting leg and the moving leg. The forearms of both arms swing alternately to the shoulder position. The *San Dian* Step is the most representative step in *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi*. It is also the unique *San Dian* Step in Han folk dance. The steps of both male and female actors are mainly *San Dian* Step. The female step is to walk forward. The male step is to walk diagonally forward. When the researcher investigated the cause of the jump in the *San Dian* Step, teacher Li Mingfang talked about the origin of the *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi*, which is inseparable from the opera. Its predecessor is the opera excerpt. The difference is that it needs to be danced more than the opera (Liu, 2014).



**Figure 7:** Representative folk dance of Shanxi - *Ti Guzi Yangge* (Chen Donghui, 2024)



**Figure 8:** Representative folk dance of Shanxi - *Tiguzi Yangge* (Chen Donghui, 2024)

In the northern region of Shanxi Province, due to its relatively high altitude and cold climate, dancers wear thick clothing. To keep their bodies warm, they tightly wrap their upper - body garments with their arms, resulting in relatively small amplitudes of upper - limb movements. Many arm movements are merely coordinated with the props in the hands to convey emotions and tell stories. Regarding lower - limb movements, men perform actions such as kicking, lifting the legs, and jumping, while women execute movements like stepping, half - squatting, and taking small steps (Mu, 2019).

The distinct cultural environments in the southern, central, and northern regions of Shanxi Province have profoundly shaped the movement language systems of the local representative folk dances, turning them into the "physical symbols" of regional culture. This correlation not only reflects the inherent compatibility between folk dances and group life as well as folk beliefs (Geertz, 1973; Malinowski, 1922), but also confirms the dialectical unity between the intrinsic form and cultural connotation of dance, thus filling the gap in the existing research regarding the in - depth interpretation of the relationship between "cultural environment and movement symbols" (Ma, 2024).

As one of the birthplaces of Chinese civilization, southern Shanxi Province has witnessed the formation of the movement language of the *Jinnan Drum Dance*, which is jointly shaped by the spirit of tracing one's roots in the root culture and the stable characteristics of the agricultural civilization. The core features of its movements are regularity, symmetry, steadiness, and strength. Dancers mostly adopt a parallel - foot standing posture, and their steps are mainly characterized by stamping on the ground and pausing, with a solid landing and a uniform rhythm, echoing the labor logic of deep plowing and stable sowing in agricultural production. The core upper - limb movements are swinging the drum in an arc and raising the arms to shoulder level, with symmetrical and regular arm movement trajectories. These movements not only mimic the respectful postures towards heaven, earth, and ancestors in sacrificial ceremonies but also imply the spiritual essence of tracing one's roots.

The Jinzhong region combines the ethical order of traditional feudal - society family culture and the spiritual genes of the red revolutionary culture of General Zuo Quan. This dual humanistic characteristic endows the *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi* with the movement features of being both gentle and vigorous, as well as lively and flexible. Under the influence of traditional family culture, the dance retains delicate and gentle movements such as waist - twisting, hip - swaying, and handkerchief - twirling. The handkerchief flutters with a moderate amplitude and a brisk rhythm, which not only reflects the life aspiration of praying for good fortune and auspiciousness in the folk customs of Jinzhong but also subtly corresponds to the spirit of forging ahead bravely in the red culture.

As the front - line battlefield for resisting invasions by ethnic minorities in ancient times and the hub of north - south trade and ethnic integration, northern Shanxi witnessed the combination of the martial spirit of frontier culture and the free characteristics of nomadic culture. This combination gave rise to the bold, unrestrained, and grand movement style of the Tiguzi Yangge dance. The core of its movements is characterized by bold steps and extended limbs. Dancers often adopt steps involving leaping and tumbling, with wide strides and rapid rhythms. For example, the horse - riding step and the kicking - jumping step clearly draw inspiration from the riding and archery postures of nomadic ethnic groups, echoing the humanistic tradition of being martial and good at combat in the frontier regions.

### **Props characteristics**

Southern Shanxi is the birthplace of farming culture and ancestral culture. During performances, the drum is used as a tool to communicate with wind, rain, thunder and lightning. It is used to pray for the continuation of offspring and good weather. Therefore, the drum props were formed by farmers in southern Shanxi from generation to generation under such a psychological drive (Suo, 2025).

The Jinzhong area is characterized by the integration of Shanxi merchant culture and red revolutionary culture. Local people believe that the use of fans can express the emotions of dancers, and dramatic conflicts can be created through fans, and storytelling performances can be performed. Therefore, during the feudal society, the highly centralized system of traditional Chinese family culture in the region, *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi* would use fans to cater to dignitaries in the early stages of its development. During the Anti-Japanese War and the War of Liberation, it encouraged the unity of the army and the people. Now people will use fans to express love between men and women, and show various stories in local life in a distinct layered way in the virtual and real world.

In northern Shanxi, people have a close relationship with horses because of the influence of nomadic culture. Since ancient times, local people have relied on horses for transportation, travel, and battle. Therefore, horse whips are a tool that local people use more frequently, and have become a typical prop in the *Ti Guzi Yangge*. There is a mountain called Hengshan in Datong City in northern Shanxi. Hengshan is a famous Taoist mountain. Taoism emphasizes following the laws of nature and pursuing inner peace and freedom. It is very similar to the mentality of people in border areas. In northern Shanxi, people who are deeply influenced by Taoism regard the gods in Taoist metaphysics as the objects of religious activities such as *Ti Guzi Yangge*. Buddhist dust props are used in dance performances. Due to the natural geographical reasons of the sandy surface and windy seasons in northern Shanxi, the tables, chairs, beds and clothes used by people in northern Shanxi in their daily lives are often stained with sand and dust. In addition, due to the high altitude and cold weather in northern Shanxi, people like to sleep on heated beds, which are more prone to dust. In order to remove sand and dust from items and clothes, brooms and feather dusters have become essential daily necessities for every household (Mu, 2019). During the dance performance, male dancers swing horse whips and Buddhist dusters in front of their bodies, showing the fierce and unrestrained temperament of men in northern Shanxi. Female dancers use brooms and feather dusters to twist their waists and hips, showing the soft and beautiful qualities of women in northern Shanxi.

### **Costume characteristics**

In southern Shanxi, male dancers wear vests, which are commonly used by farmers during fieldwork. They also tie a towel around their heads to wipe off sweat. Female dancers wear red-based tops with large flowers on them. They also wear floral harem pants and red hydrangea shoes. The clown wears a big red flower top, green pants, bells on his shoulders, and black cloth shoes.

Dancers from Jinzhong area wore military uniforms and played the roles of Red Army soldiers to show the local people's respect and admiration for the PLA soldiers. Wearing white clothes and playing the role of saving the dying and the wounded shows the people's love for life. Wearing a large flowered cotton jacket on the upper body, colorful bloomers on the lower body, and colorful shoes, playing the role of neighbors and friends shows the local people's care and love for each other.

Northern Shanxi was the battlefield where the ancient Central Plains court conquered the northern ethnic minorities, and the characters and costumes of yangge still retain many historical marks of military culture. The appearance of Guzi is based on the appearance of Wu Sheng in the opera. Guzi is divided into Yi guzi and Er guzi, both characters are Wu Sheng (Mu, 2019). Yi Guzi has water and sand on his head, a double-breasted jacket on his upper body, a long belt around his waist, bloomers on his lower body, and quick boots on his feet; the other Guzi wears a felt hat on his head, a beard, a double-breasted coat on his upper body, and a long belt on his lower body. Colorful trousers, a long belt around the waist, and black loafers. Meanwhile, influenced by the climate, the clothing is relatively heavy. The female character wears a short pea - green embroidered - collar top on the upper body, colorful trousers on the lower body, and over these, a long-pleated skirt. There is a fanny pack tied at the back, and she has colorful shoes on her feet. The image of the female character seems to serve the function of balancing the masculinity of the male character.

### **Musical Characteristics**

In the Jinnan region: percussion instruments are the most commonly used instruments in Jinnan drum dance performances. In the Jinzhong region: there are many kinds of musical instruments. String instruments include erhu, pipa, erxian, and yangqin. Percussion instruments include drums, gongs, and cymbals. Wind instruments include suona, xiao, flute, sheng, and other instruments. In the Jinbei region: the instruments are mainly traditional percussion instruments, with suona, sheng and some string instruments such as yangqin, huqin, erhc. The contrast between strong and weak is clear. All three regions use local folk tunes that are well-known to the locals, because folk tunes come from people's daily lives, with simple singing methods and simple lyrics.

### **Program Features**

In the Jinnan region and Jinzhong region: there is no fixed program for dance performances. The time and organization of the activities are adapted to the seasonality of agricultural production; the Spring Festival of the lunar calendar and the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month are important festivals for drumming activities. In the past, only the head of the community organized the performance, but now not only rural artists have to participate in the performance, but also every household, village and community, men, women and children have to participate. People use drums to make a deep sound, communicate with wind, rain, thunder and lightning, and pray for a good harvest and peace in all seasons (Tian, 2004).

In the Jinbei region: There is a fixed program for the performance. The performance ends after many steps such as posting, welcoming the gods, dancing Yangge, paying respects to family members, Yangge competition and Ma Yangge. The reason for the fixed program is that people in northern Shanxi are good at fighting and martial arts, and are generous and enthusiastic. The first function of the dance is to gather together for a lively martial arts competition. Another purpose is to be influenced by the local Taoist culture, in order to entrust the ideal wishes in one's heart to the gods through performance and pray for the gods' blessings.

In conclusion, the representative folk dance languages of Shanxi are not isolated physical forms but are closely related to the regional humanistic environment. The solemn

and regular nature of southern Shanxi, the combination of hardness and softness in central Shanxi, and the bold and unrestrained style of northern Shanxi correspond to the humanistic characteristics of the ancestral and agricultural cultures in southern Shanxi, the Jin merchant and red cultures in central Shanxi, and the frontier nomadic - integrated culture in northern Shanxi respectively. The morphological characteristics of movements, the usage of props, the matching of costumes, and the variations in routines are all concrete manifestations of cultural connotations in the practical activities of respective regions. This correlation among the humanistic environment, movement symbols, and cultural meanings not only provides empirical support for the analytical path of movement elements - symbolic encoding - cultural meanings in dance semiotics (Noë, 2004), but also compensates for the deficiency in the in-depth deconstruction of the relationship between dance language and cultural connotations in existing research, further confirming the core value of folk dance as a living carrier of regional culture.

## CONCLUSION

The representative folk dance forms in these three regions of Shanxi Province have gradually taken on their current forms through thousands of years of practice in human society. In ancient times, the representative folk dances of Shanxi Province played a significant role as an integral part of people's lives. In modern times, as a form of folk culture, it still holds significant value in people's lives (Deng, 2015). Therefore, from a historical perspective and within the context of contemporary cultural construction, researcher have re-evaluated the representative folk dance language of Shanxi Province, evaluated and judged the historical functions and contemporary value of the representative folk dances of Shanxi Province, and proposed constructive suggestions, making the greatest contribution to the future protection, inheritance and development of the representative folk dances of Shanxi Province.

### **The core cultural value of representative folk dances in Shanxi**

Firstly, the inheritance and evidential value of cultural heritage. As important carriers of Chinese culture and local culture in Shanxi, these dances, through symbols such as movements, music, and props, vividly present ancient Chinese history, agricultural civilization, and folk traditions. They provide vivid physical evidence to supplement the deficiencies in historical documentations. Viewers can immerse themselves in experiencing the long cultural heritage of Shanxi through the dance performances, and the study of their language systems is a crucial path for protecting excellent traditional culture and promoting regional characteristics (Suo, 2025).

Secondly, the transmission value of ecological wisdom and worldviews. The folk dances of Shanxi, rooted in the agricultural culture, embody the people's reverence for nature and the concept of harmonious coexistence. Ancient people used dances to worship deities of the wind, the rain, and the sky, praying for good weather and abundant harvests, essentially providing a simple interpretation of the relationship between humans and nature (Yuan & Wang, 2017). In the current era of industrialization leading to global warming and ecological destruction, this concept of respecting and adapting to nature offers important ideological inspiration for contemporary ecological civilization construction and human sustainable development, and holds profound practical significance.

Thirdly, the empowerment and connection value of livelihood culture. The representative folk dances of Shanxi originated in rural areas and were closely linked to the daily life, production, and livelihood needs of the people. They are a vivid manifestation of the culture of people's livelihood. In the contemporary context, their value has gone beyond simple artistic performances and has become an important link for connecting regional identity and empowering rural development. They provide potential paths for the integration of rural industries and the increase of residents' income (Wang, 2022).

## **The specific challenges and real threats faced by contemporary inheritance**

First, the severe crisis of the discontinuity of the inheritance entities. The acceleration of urbanization has led to the hollowing out of rural areas, with a large number of young and middle-aged laborers leaving for cities. Rural areas now exhibit a situation of an aging population concentration and the absence of young and middle-aged people. Traditional cultural inheritors generally face the problem of aging. In provinces and above, the average age of inheritors is over 65 years old. Due to factors such as urban employment opportunities and lifestyle differences, the younger generation has low interest in learning folk dances, resulting in a risk of a discontinuity in the oral and heart-to-heart transmission of core skills. Some complex movements and hidden knowledge are at risk of being lost(Chen, 2023).

Second, the erosion and disintegration of cultural ecology(Wei, 2023). Under the backdrop of globalization, the erosion of strong cultures by weak cultures has intensified, along with the impact of industrial civilization and information technology civilization. This has led to the gradual disintegration of the traditional social structure on which agricultural culture relied. The performance venues for folk dances have shrunk, and the frequency of traditional folk activities such as festivals and sacrificial ceremonies and temple exhibitions has decreased. The cultural identification of young people with local dances has weakened, and they are more inclined towards popular culture, resulting in a continuous shrinking of the audience base for folk dances.

Thirdly, the compression of living space and the shortage of resources (Chen, 2023). On one hand, rural public cultural facilities are scarce, lacking dedicated rehearsal venues, inheritance bases, and insufficient funds for the maintenance and renewal of dance props and costumes. On the other hand, there is insufficient market adaptation. The commercial transformation ability of folk dances is weak, relying solely on government subsidies for intangible cultural heritage and sporadic folk performances to sustain, making it difficult to form a virtuous cycle of inheritance, development and innovation. Some representative folk dance groups have been forced to disband due to a lack of funds.

Finally, the imbalance and predicament of innovation transformation. In the limited attempts at innovation, there exist two dual dilemmas: excessive commercialization and insufficient innovation. Some adapted works, in order to meet market demands, overly incorporate popular elements, discarding the core cultural symbols and regional characteristics of the representative folk dances of Shanxi, resulting in homogenization and superficiality. While the other part of the inheritors adhere to tradition and lack adaptation to contemporary aesthetics and communication methods, causing the dance to be disconnected from the aesthetic needs of young audiences and making it difficult to achieve dynamic inheritance (Yuan, 2023).

## **Practical Approaches and Future Prospects for Conservation and Transmission**

Strengthen policy guarantees and inheritance support. The government should introduce special policies and set up a special fund for the inheritance of folk dance. The funds will be used for subsidies for inheritors, training of young people, and construction of inheritance bases. Establish a cooperation model between folk dance inheritors and educational institutions. Incorporate folk dance into the art education curriculum of local primary and secondary schools and the dance professional teaching system of universities, to systematically cultivate young inheritors. At the same time, optimize rural public cultural facilities to provide fixed venue support for dance rehearsals and performances (Bi, 2024).

Promote the deep integration of culture and industry. Using rural tourism as the carrier, create a model of integrating intangible cultural heritage and tourism. Set up intangible cultural heritage exhibition halls and dance experience bases in key villages, allowing tourists to participate in dance teaching and watch original ecological performances, achieving a closed loop of cultural display, experience consumption, and revenue feedback. Cultivate professional folk dance groups and encourage them to create works that combine

traditional characteristics with contemporary aesthetics, regional culture with the spirit of the times. Expand income sources through commercial performances and cultural product development, making folk dance a cultural engine for rural revitalization (Chen, 2023).

Innovative communication methods and audience cultivation. By leveraging new media technologies such as short-video platforms, live streaming, and virtual reality (VR), we produce content like dance technique tutorials and cultural story interpretations, to expand the dissemination radius of folk dances and attract the attention of young people. We also hold events such as the representative folk dance competition of Shanxi and the intangible cultural heritage culture festival, to build a platform for communication and display, and enhance the people's sense of identity and pride in local culture, while cultivating a new generation of audience (Ma, 2023).

### **Prospects for Future Research Directions**

This study has conducted a preliminary exploration of the cultural values and inheritance paths of representative folk dances in Shanxi. In the future, further in-depth research can be carried out from the following dimensions.

In-depth research in specific fields. Focus on a single dance category, such as the action symbol system of the *Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi*, and the changes in the folk functions of the *Ti Guzi Yangge*. Conduct more targeted case studies. Deeply explore the intrinsic connections between folk dances and regional dialects, folk beliefs, and production and daily life, enriching the dimensions of cultural interpretation (Suo, 2025).

Quantitative research on the inheritance status. By means of questionnaire surveys, data statistics and other methods, a quantitative analysis is conducted on the inheritance population, audience structure and communication effectiveness of representative folk dances in Shanxi. Key issues and weak links in the inheritance process are accurately identified to provide data support for policy-making (Liu, 2016).

An interdisciplinary perspective is adopted for innovative research, integrating theories from multiple disciplines such as communication studies, sociology, and economics. This research focuses on the contemporary communication patterns, changes in social functions, and industrial transformation paths of representative folk dances in Shanxi. It also explores the construction of digital intangible cultural heritage and builds a digital resource library for folk dances. Through digital technologies, the core skills can be permanently preserved and widely disseminated (Wang, 2022).

Comparative Research and Experience Reference. Conduct a comparative study between representative folk dances in Shanxi and those in other regions of China, such as the *Shaanxi Yaogu* and the *Anhui Huagu Deng*. Analyze the inheritance models and innovation experiences of folk dances in different regions to provide references for the development of Shanxi folk dances. Meanwhile, draw on the advanced concepts and practical cases of international intangible cultural heritage protection to explore a path for the protection of folk dances with Chinese characteristics and Shanxi features.

The representative folk dances of Shanxi are living fossils of regional culture and an important part of the spiritual home of the Chinese nation. In the face of the impact of the modernization process, only by handling the relationship between tradition and innovation, protection and development with a dialectical mindset, while firmly adhering to the core cultural genes and actively adapting to the needs of contemporary society, can these precious cultural heritages regain vitality and vigor in the new era, and contribute unique cultural strength to contemporary cultural construction, rural revitalization and ecological civilization construction.

## ENDNOTES

1. Jin(晋) is the abbreviation of Shanxi Province.
2. Jinbei(晋北) is located in the northern part of Shanxi Province, including three prefecture-level cities, Xinzhou City is located in the south, Shuzhou City is located in the middle, and Datong City is located in the north. There are long and narrow basins in the north and south, the Datong Basin in the north and the Xinzhou Basin in the south.
3. Jinnan(晋南) located in the south of Shanxi Province. Jinnan area includes Linfen City, Yuncheng City, Jinzhong City and Changzhi City. It is connected to Shaanxi Province by the Yellow River (north-south flow) in the west, and Henan Province by the Yellow River (west-east flow) in the south.
4. Jinzhong(晋中): is the south of northern Shanxi is the Jinzhong area. The region includes four prefecture-level cities: Taiyuan City (the capital of Shanxi Province), Luliang City, Yangquan City, and Jinzhong City.
5. Yangge(秧歌): It is the generic name of a kind of folk dance widely spread in northern China. Yangge has a history of thousands of years in China and reached its peak during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Various forms of Yangge are widely spread among the people. When people in the north were working in the fields, they sang songs to relieve the pressure of labor, which gradually became Yangge.
6. Taihang Mountain(太行山): Important mountains and geographical boundaries in eastern China. Located at the junction of Hebei Province and Shanxi Province, it spans four provinces and cities including Beijing, Hebei, Shanxi and Henan.
7. Wutai Mountain(五台山): Located in Xinzhou City, Shanxi Province. It is one of the four famous mountains of Chinese Buddhism. Because the climate on the mountain is mostly cold and there is no scorching heat even in midsummer, it is also called Qingliang Mountain.
8. Yao(堯) period: A legendary wise king in ancient China. His capital was in Linfen, southern Shanxi Province. At that time, ordinary people did not know the weather and the terrain, and did not know how to calculate time. Yao decided to use 366 days as a year, and add a leap month every three years to adjust the relationship between the calendar and the four seasons, so that the farming time of each year would be correct and there would be no mistakes. From this, we can see that the ancients regarded the era of Emperor Yao as an era of great progress in farming culture.
9. Zuoquan Xiaohua Xi(左权小花戏): It can also be called Xiaohua Xi. It is a kind of folk Yangge produced near Zuoquan, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province. In 2014, it was successfully declared as the fourth batch of national intangible cultural heritage.
10. Jinnan Drum Dance(晋南鼓舞): It can also be called Jinnan Flower Drum. Produced in the Jinnan area of Shanxi Province. It is mainly a folk Yangge performed with drums and gongs. In 2011, it was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list.
11. Ti Guzi Yangge(踢鼓子秧歌): It can also be called Tutanzi Yangge. A kind of folk Yangge originated in the northern Jin area of Shanxi Province. In 2013, it was included in the provincial intangible cultural heritage list.

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