

DANCING TEA LEAVES: BODILY AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL MEANINGS IN THE MOVEMENT TECHNIQUES OF GANNAN TEA-PICKING DANCE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the distinctive movement techniques of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance to reveal how bodily aesthetics and cultural symbolism express the lived experiences and resilient spirit of the Gannan people. The continuous advancement of China's efforts to safeguard traditional culture has led to the inclusion of this dance—one of the oldest living folk traditions—on the national Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Renowned for its humor, vivid expressiveness, agile movements, and lively rhythms, the dance is characterized by three distinctive techniques: the Dwarf Step, Single Sleeve, and Fan Flower. These techniques are not only visually recognizable in performance but also embody rich layers of bodily aesthetics, folkloric symbolism, and cultural memory, serving as key features that distinguish the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance from other folk traditions. Through a qualitative research method and choreological approach, this paper analyzes these three movement techniques in terms of movement structure, expressive function, and cultural connotation. The findings reveal that the dance reenacts tea-picking and production scenes, transforming labor into an artistic expression of everyday life. Ultimately, this paper highlights the unique artistic charm and profound cultural significance of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, contributing to broader understandings of bodily technique and aesthetic traditions in the folk dances of southern Jiangxi, China.

Keywords Choreology, Cultural Heritage, Folk Dance Aesthetics, Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, Movement Techniques

INTRODUCTION

The Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is a folk-dance tradition with distinctive local characteristics that originated in the Gannan region of southern Jiangxi Province, China. Characterized by mountainous terrain and fertile river valleys, Gannan possesses a favorable natural environment for tea cultivation, which has enabled the region to gradually develop into one of China's major tea-producing areas. The prosperity of the tea industry has not only shaped the local agricultural economy and social life but has also fostered a tea culture centered on tea-picking labor, tea-related activities, and local customs, thereby providing a specific geographical and cultural foundation for the emergence of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance (Liu, 2006). Therefore, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance did not develop as an artistic form detached from local life; rather, its movement patterns, bodily rhythms, and performance content are closely connected to the accumulated labor experience and tea-cultural traditions of the Gannan region.

The Gannan Tea-Picking Dance initially developed as a form of self-entertainment and emotional expression among tea-picking laborers during their work and daily lives. Subsequently, alongside the development of tea culture and local performance activities, it gradually evolved into a folk performing art with a relatively complete stylistic system (Lai & Zhao, 2020). Relevant historical records indicate that its development can be traced back to the Ming and Qing dynasties. During this period, the continuing expansion of tea culture and the localization of the tribute-tea system encouraged the emergence of song-and-dance forms associated with tea-related activities (Lu, 2006). Early performances had certain connections with the literati and local tea-related activities. By the Qing dynasty, however, as tea-drinking culture gradually became integrated into the everyday lives of ordinary people, the social foundation of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance continued to expand (Song, 2022). At the same time, the rise of teahouses, festivals, and public performance spaces enabled the dance to further incorporate elements of folk singing and storytelling, local opera, and the imitation of everyday life. It consequently developed into a comprehensive art form combining labor narratives, entertainment functions, and aesthetic expression (Liu et al., 2021). This developmental process demonstrates that the artistic style of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance was not formed statically but was continuously constructed and enriched through the long-term interaction among local labor practices, social relations, and folk-performance traditions.

In contemporary society, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance remains an important symbol of cultural identity and local memory in the Gannan region and has been inscribed on China's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Zhu, 2024). Its dance language is characterized by humor, flexibility, and expressiveness, reflecting both the vitality of folk art rooted in everyday life and the bodily skills and artistic refinement developed through long-term accumulation (Zheng, 2018). At present, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is widely performed in community festivals, school education, stage productions, and local cultural activities, where it continues to fulfil functions related to cultural presentation, arts education, and the transmission of tradition across different practical settings (Li, 2018). However, such living transmission depends not only on the continuation of performance activities but also on whether

its representative movement techniques, bodily style, and cultural meanings can be accurately understood and effectively transmitted in contemporary performances. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of its core movement techniques provides an important foundation for understanding the artistic characteristics of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance and the mechanisms through which its culture is sustained.

Within the rich movement vocabulary of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower are three representative movement techniques (Guo, 2013). The dwarf step primarily creates a distinctive dynamic image through a lowered center of gravity, bent-knee movement, and rhythmic footwork. The single sleeve extends the spatial expression of movement through the swinging and flicking of the sleeve in coordination with the body. The fan flower, meanwhile, produces diverse visual forms through the opening, closing, rotating, and waving of the fan. These three techniques respectively reflect the movement structure and performance methods of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance through the dimensions of footwork, bodily movement, and prop use. They not only possess strong visual recognizability but also embody cultural meanings related to labor experience, gender imagery, local life, and folk beliefs. Therefore, these movements should not be regarded merely as technical forms presented on stage; they should also be understood as expressive carriers through which bodily experience, aesthetic ideas, and local cultural memory are integrated.

Although previous studies have introduced the historical origins, artistic style, and representative movements of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, relevant discussions have largely focused on movement names, technical characteristics, or general cultural value. Relatively little systematic and integrated analysis has been devoted to how movement structures generate particular aesthetic effects or how bodily techniques embody and transmit local cultural meanings. In particular, although the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower are often described separately as representative movement elements, the internal relationships among them in terms of bodily use, expressive function, and cultural symbolism have not yet been sufficiently explained. This research gap has, to some extent, limited a deeper understanding of the bodily language of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance and the cultural mechanisms embedded within it.

Accordingly, this article examines the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower from three interrelated dimensions: movement structure, expressive function, and cultural meaning. By combining ethnographic observation with choreological analysis, the article not only analyzes the formal characteristics of these techniques in relation to bodily posture, shifts in the center of gravity, spatial use, and coordination with props, but also further discusses how they represent labor experience, local aesthetics, and cultural memory. This article aims to reveal the artistic mechanisms and cultural meanings of the movement techniques of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, thereby deepening the understanding of the bodily language and aesthetic traditions of folk dance in southern Jiangxi, China, and providing a useful research perspective for the documentation, analysis, and transmission of movement techniques in local folk dance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As one of the representative folk-dance forms in southern China, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance has long attracted scholarly attention in the fields of dance studies, ethnology, and cultural studies. Existing research has mainly focused on its historical origins, local culture, artistic style, movement techniques, and transmission and development (Wen, 2015; Chang, 2017; Wu, 2020). These studies generally regard the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance not only as a form of local performing art but also as an embodied expression of labor practices, tea culture, and folk memory in the Gannan region. On this basis, this section reviews its historical origins, artistic characteristics, representative movement techniques, and the limitations of existing research.

Regarding its historical origins, Wen (2015) and Chang (2017) point out that the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance originated from the self-entertainment activities of tea farmers during labor and daily life, and that its movement vocabulary and performance forms were deeply influenced by local tea culture and folk traditions. Through the coordination of dance steps, hand gestures, bodily postures, and props, performers transformed movements associated with tea picking, tea production, and everyday life in mountainous areas into a rhythmic and aesthetically expressive dance language (Wu, 2020). It is therefore evident that the formation of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance was not merely the result of artistic creation, but emerged from the long-term interaction among local labor experience, tea culture, and folk entertainment.

In terms of artistic characteristics and performance style, previous studies have emphasized the flexibility and everyday-life qualities of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, as well as the close relationship between bodily movement and emotional expression (Mao, 2020; Li, 2022). These characteristics are commonly presented through shifts in the center of gravity, bent-knee locomotion, bodily swaying, exaggerated movements, and the imitation of labor and daily life. Such studies have provided an important foundation for understanding the overall aesthetic style of the dance. However, they have largely remained at the level of general stylistic description, while discussion of how specific movement structures generate these aesthetic characteristics is still relatively limited.

In recent years, some studies have begun to focus on the movement techniques and bodily aesthetics of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Guo (2013), Wu (2020), and Wang (2021) identify the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower as its three most representative techniques. The dwarf step creates a distinctive bodily form through a lowered center of gravity, bent knees, and continuous movement. The single sleeve expands the spatial range of movement through the coordination of the sleeve with the arms, shoulders, and torso. The fan flower produces varied visual forms through the opening, closing, rotating, and swinging of the fan. These three techniques constitute important components of the movement language of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance through the respective dimensions of footwork, bodily extension, and prop use.

Existing studies further indicate that these techniques are not merely dance skills but also embody local life, bodily knowledge, and folk memory (Wang, 2021). The dwarf step is

closely related to movement through mountainous terrain and labor experience; the single sleeve reflects the integration of costume and bodily movement; and the fan flower performs multiple functions in rhythmic organization, emotional expression, and character portrayal. Therefore, the three techniques not only possess distinctive visual characteristics but also serve as important expressive carriers of local aesthetics and cultural experience in Gannan.

However, most existing studies remain focused on descriptions of the origins, basic forms, and general cultural meanings of these movements, with relatively little effort to place movement structure, expressive function, and cultural meaning within a unified analytical framework. In particular, there is still a lack of systematic discussion of how the three techniques generate specific aesthetic effects through the coordination of bodily movement and props.

In summary, previous studies have established an important foundation for understanding the historical background, artistic style, and representative techniques of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of the movement structures, expressive functions, and cultural meanings of the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower remains lacking. Therefore, this article adopts the aesthetics of dance studies as its theoretical perspective and combines ethnographic observation with choreological analysis to examine these three movement techniques, with the aim of deepening the understanding of the bodily aesthetics and cultural meanings of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance.

METHODS, DATA COLLECTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to analyze three representative movement techniques of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance: the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower. Centering on dance movement techniques, the study focuses on their movement structures, expressive functions, and cultural meanings, thereby addressing the limited discussion of specific movement techniques in existing research. This study combines perspectives from performance studies and a choreological approach. The choreological perspective is used to analyze the bodily postures, spatial patterns, dynamic qualities, and rhythmic characteristics of the movements, while the performance studies perspective is employed to interpret the meanings of these movements in relation to local life, cultural memory, and symbolic expression.

Data Collection

This study primarily employs two methods of data collection: non-participant observation and literature analysis. These methods respectively provide visual materials and historical-cultural contexts for the movement analysis.

Non-Participant Observation:

The researcher observed live performances of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance and analyzed visual materials, including stage performances, teaching excerpts, and documentaries. The

observation focused primarily on the movement structures, rhythms, and dynamic qualities of the dwarf step, single sleeve, and fan flower, as well as the use of fans and sleeves in performance. Through repeated viewing and comparison, the study systematically analyzed the movement trajectories, bodily expressions, and aesthetic characteristics of the three techniques.

Literature Analysis

The materials used for the literature analysis included journal articles, theses and dissertations, monographs, government documents, intangible cultural heritage materials, and relevant media reports. These sources were primarily used to understand the historical development, local cultural context, and performance traditions of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. They also provided contextual support for analyzing the labor experience, folk beliefs, and local cultural memory embodied in the three techniques.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily grounded in Choreological Aesthetics Theory and draws on relevant scholarship in the fields of choreology and dance analysis. It understands dance movement as an embodied artistic expression jointly constituted through the body, space, dynamics, rhythm, form, and relationships. Choreology not only focuses on the notation and classification of movement but also examines how dance forms generate aesthetic effects and communicate meaning through the analysis of movement organization, dynamic qualities, and performance relationships (Laban, 1974; Adshead et al., 1988; Preston-Dunlop, 1998).

Choreological Aesthetics Theory emphasizes the relationship between movement structure and aesthetic expression. Charles and Justin (2014) point out that the theory is closely related to choreographic principles and Laban Movement Theory and can be used to analyze dance movement through such categories as body, dynamics, form, and space. The bodily dimension focuses on bodily posture and the coordination among different body parts; the spatial dimension concerns movement direction, level, pathway, and range; and the dynamic and rhythmic dimensions examine the qualities of movement in relation to time, weight, flow, and force. These dimensions interact with one another and together constitute the formal characteristics and aesthetic style of dance (Laban, 1974; Charles & Justin, 2014).

The choreological perspective also regards dance as an integrated whole formed through the interaction of the body, movement, space, sound, performers, and material media. The aesthetic meaning of movement arises not only from observable bodily forms but also from the relationships among different performance elements and their sociocultural contexts (Preston-Dunlop et al., 2003). Therefore, dance analysis requires both an examination of movement structure and an interpretation of its connections with local ways of life, cultural experience, and symbolic meaning. Figure 1 illustrates how Choreological Aesthetics Theory is operationalized through three analytical dimensions: movement structure, expressive function, and cultural meaning, to examine the three representative movement techniques of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance.

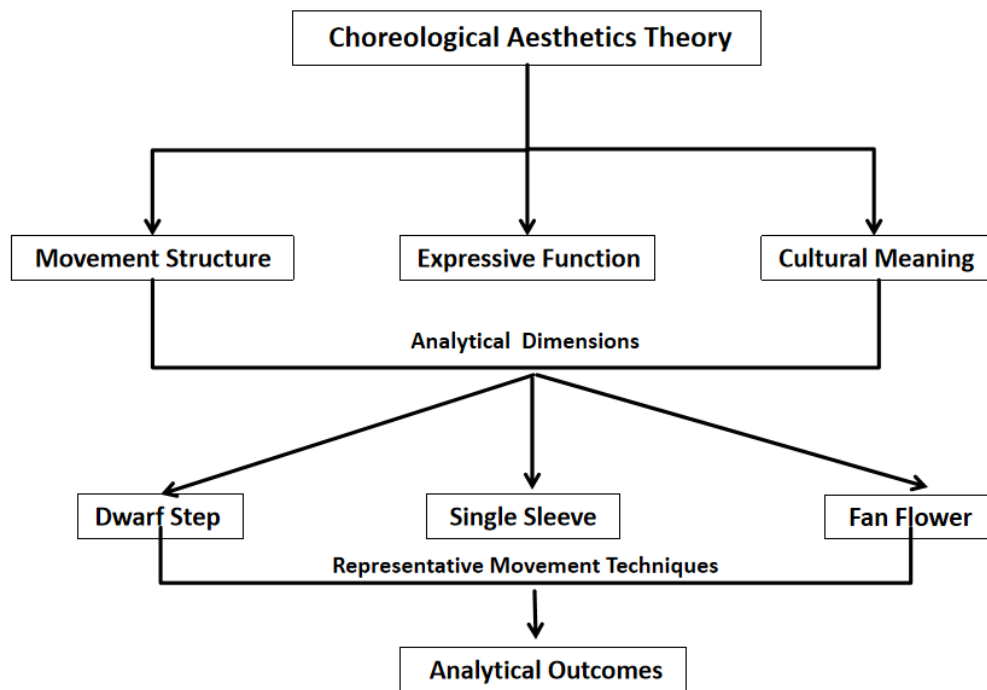


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of Movement Techniques in Gannan Tea-Picking Dance

Based on this theoretical framework, the present study analyzes the Dwarf Step, Single Sleeve, and Fan Flower of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance at three levels: movement structure, expressive function, and cultural meaning. Specifically, it:

1. analyzes the bodily postures, movement pathways, rhythmic characteristics, dynamic qualities, and spatial configurations of the three movement techniques;
2. explores the interactive relationships between the body and space, as well as between the body and material objects such as fans and sleeves;
3. examines how these movements embody the labor experiences, local bodily language, and folkloric expressions of the Gannan region;
4. discusses the formal logic, aesthetic style, and cultural meanings presented by traditional movement techniques within the contemporary stage context.

Guided by this theoretical orientation, the study combines non-participant observation and literature analysis, treating movement both as an observable bodily form and as an embodied text that carries local experience and cultural meaning. Through a comprehensive analysis of the three representative movement techniques, the study seeks to reveal their aesthetic mechanisms and cultural meanings and to explain how the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance continues to sustain local identity and artistic vitality within the contemporary cultural environment.

DATA ANALYSIS

Drawing upon the principles of Choreological Aesthetics and guided by the study's qualitative methodology, this section presents a detailed analysis of the three representative technical movements in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance: the Dwarf Step, Single Sleeve, and Fan Flower. Each movement is examined from both its formal and expressive dimensions, focusing on spatial structure, dynamic quality, rhythmic pattern, and cultural symbolism. Through this analytical process, the study seeks to reveal how these techniques embody the aesthetic logic and cultural sensibility of the Gannan region.

Dwarf Step

The dwarf step is one of the most representative basic steps in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Its most distinctive feature lies in the dancer maintaining a lowered center of gravity, keeping the body close to the ground while moving in small, shuffling steps with bent knees in a semi-squatting posture (Chen, 2021). This gait is often accompanied by swaying and bouncing, producing a rhythm that is at once humorous and agile, and imbuing the dance with the vivid pulse of everyday life and labour (Xu, 2024). This technique not only possesses strong choreographic qualities in terms of movement structure but also reflects the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance's aesthetic inclination toward being grounded and relatable.

The movement inspiration for the dwarf step originates directly from the working posture of tea farmers during tea-picking. The Gannan region is characterized by mountainous terrain, and tea trees are typically planted on slopes. To facilitate harvesting, tea farmers must bend forward, crouch, and maintain a semi-squatting position to keep their balance. Over time, this low-centered posture, shaped through daily labor, evolved into habitual movements specific to tea picking, including bowing, shoulder balancing, bearing weight, and squatting (Zou, 2023). The variations within these labor movements provided the real-life prototype for the basic form of the dwarf step.

The dwarf step consists of three levels—high, medium, and low—each reflecting different spatial dimensions and dynamic changes in dance performance, placing high demands on the dancer's physical control and expressive ability (Huang, 2006). The high-level step is light and agile, conveying uprightness and extension; the medium-level step emphasizes stability and coordination, producing a soft, fluid rhythm; while the low-level step, through deep knee bends and a lowered center of gravity, embodies strength and groundedness (Fu, 2019). During training, dancers must gradually master and adapt to these various levels and postures in order to achieve flexible transitions and expressive clarity within the dance. (See Figure 2.)

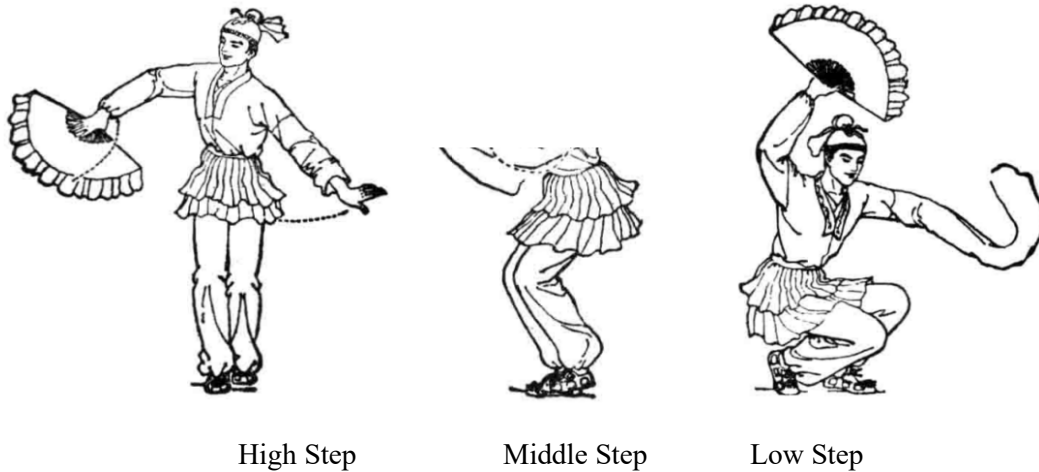


Figure2: Three steps in the dwarf step of Gannan tea-picking dance

Source: Page 25 of the book " Gannan Tea-Picking Folk Dance Teaching-Material and Practice", author Guo Lei, published by People's Music in 2013

From the perspective of choreology aesthetics, the dwarf step emphasizes control of the body's center of gravity and the precise distribution of rhythm. Characterized by quick, compact footwork and a distinct rhythmic structure, it conveys a dynamic sense of physical heaviness balanced by a lighthearted spirit through alternating knee bends and foot stamping (Wu, 2020). Structurally, the dwarf step is often combined with hand gestures, facial expressions, and the use of props to form complete dance segments, vividly portraying the scenes and postures of tea farmers working in the mountains (Liu, 2018). This bodily posture embodies both the adaptive strategies of laborers negotiating the natural environment and the collective bodily memory shaped through regional labor practices.

On a cultural level, the dwarf step is regarded as one of the movements that best express the spirit and demeanor of working people in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. It simulates the naturally low walking posture adopted by tea farmers in mountainous areas or tea plantations to facilitate picking, representing an artistic distillation of everyday labor scenes (Guo, 2013). In dance, the dwarf step is not a mere replication of movement; rather, it incorporates rhythm, exaggeration, and musicality into the imitation, retaining its authenticity while infusing it with humor and symbolic meaning. It powerfully encapsulates the folk ethos of diligence, resilience, and pragmatism. (Mao, 2020).

Within a folkloric context, the dwarf step is often imbued with performative humor. For example, in the dance piece *Liu Er Shang Lu*, dancers combine the dwarf step with exaggerated facial expressions, comedic dialogue, and interactive segments to enhance communication and resonance with the audience (Ou, 2021). This technique does not merely convey abstract aesthetic concepts but brings forth a tangible sense of local flavor and lived wisdom, fully demonstrating the dual function of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance as both entertainment and cultural expression.

Historically, the dwarf step became more defined during the development of the tea-picking dance in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Over time, it was continually refined and reinforced through intergenerational transmission by folk artists, integration with regional opera forms, and modern stage choreography. It has evolved into a signature movement that distinguishes the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance from other folk dances (Xie, 2016). Its transmission relies not only on written records and formal teaching but is deeply rooted in dancers' embodied practice and the collective memory of local communities.

In conclusion, the dwarf step exemplifies how bodily posture, rhythm, and expressive humor converge to translate everyday labor into choreographed form. It encapsulates the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance's aesthetic of groundedness and vitality, serving as both a choreographic foundation and a symbol of local identity. It bridges labor and dance, daily life and art, past and present, making it one of the most vital and emblematic movement symbols within the aesthetic system of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance.

Single Sleeve

The single sleeve is one of the most iconic and expressive techniques in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, renowned for its high level of symbolism and performative value. In this technique, the dancer wears a costume with only one long sleeve, manipulating it through actions such as tossing, lifting, and twisting (see Figure 3). These movements generate a visually striking rhythm and a sense of theatrical tension (Huang & Chen, 2005). The single sleeve highlights the dancer's refined control over limb extension and spatial rhythm while simultaneously embodying cultural symbols and gendered expressions. It is widely employed to portray the grace, poise, and everyday demeanor of tea-picking women.

The origin of the single sleeve can be traced to the towels once carried by tea farmers. When working in the heat of the mountains, farmers used towels to wipe sweat—typically holding them in the left hand while using the right hand to pick tea. Over time, this habitual action evolved into a distinctive movement pattern. Performers later refined and stylized this daily gesture, transforming it into a unique expressive form and elevating the sleeve into a vital performative element within the dance (Xie, 2024). Unlike traditional Chinese aesthetics, which favor bilateral symmetry in both costume and movement, the single sleeve intentionally disrupts this balance, producing a visually arresting and asymmetrical artistic effect (Lai, 2014).

Beyond its function as a costume element, the sleeve becomes an expressive extension of the dancer's body. Structurally, the technique depends on the nuanced coordination between the sleeve and the body (Chen & Liu, 2017). Through controlled movements of the wrist, elbow, and shoulder, the dancer sets the sleeve in motion—its fabric rippling through the air in wide, wave-like arcs. These flowing trajectories emphasize flexibility, rhythm, and grace, producing a movement vocabulary that feels both dynamic and refined (Wang, 2019). The sleeve's rhythm often synchronizes with changes in footwork and gaze, creating a unified bodily flow where the body leads and the sleeve naturally follows. This interdependence establishes a distinctive kinetic logic in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance.

On an aesthetic level, the single sleeve accentuates feminine elegance and agility. Its fluid motion enhances visual continuity, delaying momentum and softening the body's lines to create an impression of weightlessness and grace (Ji, 2019). This aesthetic is not merely decorative but reflects deeper values rooted in traditional Chinese femininity—gentle yet resilient, poised yet powerful (Wen, 2013). Through visual exaggeration and rhythmic variation, the single sleeve presents the female performer as both graceful and spirited, infusing the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance with a distinctly feminine tone.

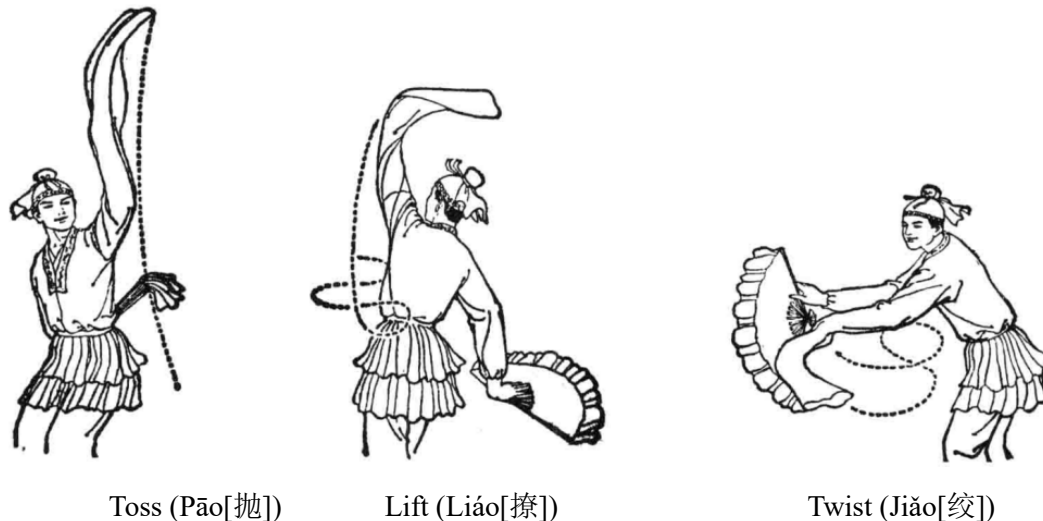


Figure 3: The single sleeve movements of the Gannan tea-picking dance

Source: Page 22 of the book " Gannan Tea-Picking Folk Dance Teaching-Material and Practice", author Guo Lei, published by People's Music in 2013

Culturally, the single sleeve operates as a stylized medium that merges labor and art. It intensifies the spatial and emotional dimensions of the dance while symbolizing the everyday gestures of tea farmers (Tu, 2024). The sleeve functions almost as a living extension of the body, forming a dual agency with the dancer that enriches performative texture and visual depth. In duets or group sequences, it often becomes a playful device for flirtation, humor, or emotional dialogue, deepening the interpersonal dynamics of the stage (Zeng, 2013).

In contemporary performance practice, choreographers have expanded the expressive potential of the single sleeve through experimentation with stage design and narrative. In works such as *Na Yi Bie*, the sleeve's length was extended for dramatic effect, while retaining the core Gannan Tea-Picking movement vocabulary. When combined with spins, leaps, and new compositional techniques, the result was choreography of heightened visual power and emotional resonance (Xu & Hu, 2013). The sleeve's trajectory becomes increasingly fluid and multilayered, articulating emotion and movement with remarkable precision. Through such creative reinterpretations, the single sleeve evolves beyond its traditional role as a labor symbol, gaining broader artistic and emotional depth (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Folk dance work "Na Yi Bie". Performer Luo Wenbo Source: In Sohu News, dance work won the National Dance Gold Award, https://news.sohu.com/a/669325493_121124696. 21 April 2023

In conclusion, the single sleeve transcends its origin in everyday labor to become a rich aesthetic and cultural symbol. Through the fusion of body and prop, it embodies the dance's spirit of grace, resilience, and expressive beauty, marking it as a core element of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance's choreological identity.

Fan Flower

Fan flower is one of the most visually captivating and decorative signature techniques in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. In this movement, dancers hold a fan and employ techniques such as flicking from behind, shoveling, and tossing (see Figure 5) to create visual effects reminiscent of blooming flowers or drifting clouds. Owing to its dynamic shapes and lively rhythm, it has been vividly named fan flower (Duan, 2022). This technique not only possesses strong expressive power in motion but also integrates the symbolic and performative qualities of folk art, making it an indispensable component of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance performance system.

The origin of fan flower is closely tied to Gannan's rich tea culture. As one of China's renowned tea-producing regions, Gannan has long preserved the tradition of handcrafted tea-making. During this process, to maintain the quality of the tea leaves, farmers often use a pan-frying method, in which the fan becomes an essential tool. It helps disperse heat, prevent overheating, and preserve the aroma and color of the tea leaves. Moreover, given Gannan's hilly terrain and subtropical climate, tea farmers frequently climb the mountains under intense heat to pick tea, and the fan serves as an indispensable item for cooling off during fieldwork (Xu, 2016).

Over time, the fan came to play a significant role in the daily lives of tea farmers, gradually embedding itself in their bodily memory and labor rhythms. The opening, waving, and rotating of the fan naturally echoed the gestures involved in tea picking and processing. As these movements—rich in the rhythms of labor—were gradually refined and stylized, they evolved

into the classic fan flower technique in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance (Wang, 2021). The technique not only preserves the aesthetic of labor but also vividly embodies the hardworking spirit, creativity, and refined lifestyle of the tea-region people through a vibrant dance vocabulary. Today, as one of the most visually appealing and decorative techniques in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, fan flower carries the historical memory of a practical tool while also showcasing the unique charm born from the fusion of tea culture and folk artistry.

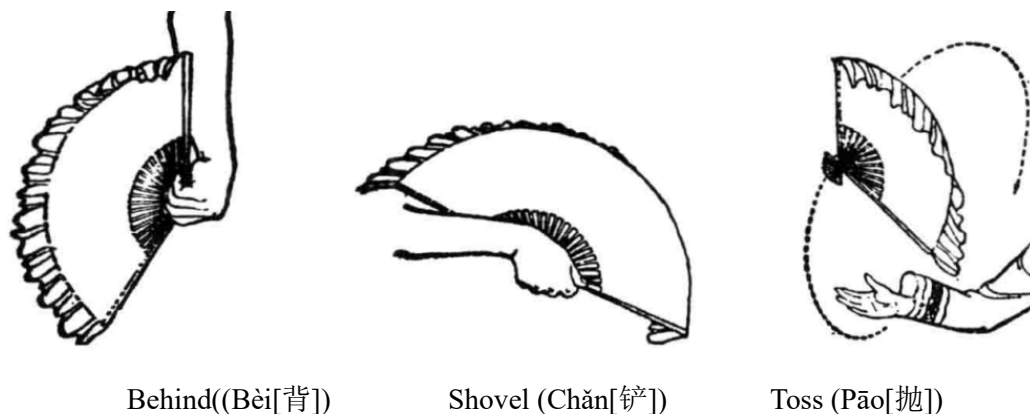


Figure 5: The fan flower movements of the Gannan tea-picking dance

Source: Page 20 of the book " Gannan Tea-Picking Folk Dance Teaching-Material and Practice", author Guo Lei, published by People's Music in 2013.

On the level of folklore and culture, fan flower is not merely a technical display, but a tangible embodiment of cultural symbolism and emotional expression. In Gannan folk tradition, the fan often signifies auspiciousness and happiness, frequently appearing in festivals, weddings, and harvest celebrations. The fan flower movements in dance therefore symbolize joy and abundance, reflecting laborers' reverence for nature and their love for life (Liu et al., 2021). Moreover, fan represents a bridge between humans and nature, as well as among people themselves. In the dancer's hand, it becomes an extension of the body, conveying rich emotional messages and social meanings through changes in rhythm and posture.

Structurally, fan flower exemplifies the high coordination between prop manipulation and bodily language. Dancers typically hold the fan with one or both hands, using coordinated movements of the wrist, elbow, and shoulder to trace flowing arcs and ripples through the air. This technique is often combined with turns, leaps, and quick steps, resulting in layered rhythms of spinning, opening, and closing that evoke natural imagery such as blooming flowers or fluttering butterflies (Guo, 2013). Furthermore, the finger techniques used in fan flower are highly codified, with classifications such as one-finger, two-finger, up to five-finger flowers. These demand exceptional precision in finger control and fan manipulation (Tang, 2022). Such diverse movement vocabularies not only enhance the dance's expressive power but also reflect the meticulous technical standards maintained in the transmission of the tea-picking dance tradition.

A representative example can be seen in the dance work Ying Shan Hong, which integrates fan flower techniques with emotional expression. Drawing upon the movement vocabulary of Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, the choreography incorporates intricate fan flower details to

portray the beauty of nature and the authenticity of human emotion. In every fan wave and spin, dancers reconstruct the visual imagery of fragrant tea fields while expressing layered emotions and narrative depth. The fan thus becomes an artistic medium connecting the inner world of the performer with the outer world of the stage (Qin & Hu, 2022) (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Folk dance work "Ying Shan Hong". Performing unit: Beijing Dance Academy
Source: In Sohu News, Dance China. https://www.sohu.com/a/767024595_121124696. 26
March 2024

From an aesthetic perspective, fan flower constructs its artistic value through the beauty of lines and rhythm. The interplay between the fan's softness and firmness, openness and closure, slowness and speed, creates a dynamic tension that enriches rhythmic variation and structural layering. In terms of emotional expression, fan flower can convey a wide range of feelings—joy, anger, sorrow, and delight (Ma, 2018). A gentle unfolding of the fan may symbolize happiness, a sharp closure may imply anger, while repetitive waving can suggest contemplation or wistfulness. This method of using the fan to externalize emotion and convey inner thought elevates fan flower beyond visual spectacle, transforming it into a powerful medium for emotional communication and character portrayal in the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. In conclusion, fan flower not only showcases the artistic refinement and cultural depth of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance but also embodies the threefold value of traditional dance in visual expression, physical technique, and cultural transmission. It stands as both a crystallization of technical artistry and a living vessel of collective memory, symbolizing the regional aesthetics and labor spirit of Gannan. As one of the most iconic features of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, fan flower exemplifies the deep integration of traditional dance and folk culture, offering audiences a rich aesthetic experience while breathing new vitality into the contemporary expression of traditional dance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through an analysis of the three representative movement techniques, the Dwarf Step, Single Sleeve, and Fan Flower, this study finds that the bodily expression of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is grounded in the interaction among embodied experience, cultural symbolism,

and aesthetic construction. The Dwarf Step transforms local labor experience into a rhythmic bodily language characterized by a low center of gravity. The Single Sleeve strengthens emotional expression and character portrayal through the coordination of the body and costume, while the Fan Flower creates dynamic imagery with folkloric symbolism and visual appeal through the manipulation of the prop. Together, these three techniques constitute the distinctive embodied aesthetic system of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, transforming local life experiences, cultural memory, and regional identity into visible dance expressions. A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the Analysis of the Three Representative Movement Techniques

Movement Technique	Formal Features	Aesthetic and Cultural Meaning
Dwarf Step	Lowered centre of gravity, rhythmic repetition	Labour experience, bodily memory, resilience
Single Sleeve	Body–costume coordination, sleeve movement	Emotional expression, elegance, character portrayal
Fan Flower	Opening, shaking and rotating the fan	Folk imagery, festivity, cultural memory

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, as a vital form of Chinese folk expression, is distinguished by three signature technique movements—Dwarf Step, Single Sleeve, and Fan Flower. These movements not only display choreographic refinement but also embody the aesthetic, cultural, and symbolic essence of the Gannan region. Together, they reveal how folk-dance transforms lived labor and social memory into an art of embodied storytelling. The analysis demonstrates that these techniques articulate a unique aesthetic of embodiment and symbolism. The Dwarf Step translates the grounded gestures of labor into rhythmic artistry; the Single Sleeve transforms costume into an expressive extension of the body, enabling emotional and narrative communication; and the Fan Flower turns a utilitarian prop into a symbol of celebration, prosperity, and harmony with nature. Through these embodied forms, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance constructs a corporeal semiotics that bridges life and art. Theoretically, the findings affirm that folk dance functions as a living archive of regional aesthetics and collective memory, where practical gestures evolve into aesthetic languages. These movements exemplify how bodily practice operates as both cultural transmission and creative reinvention, preserving local identity while adapting to contemporary expression. Future research integrating ethnographic inquiry, oral testimony, and digital motion analysis could further elucidate the processes of transmission and innovation within this tradition, supporting its sustainable preservation and renewed artistic vitality in modern cultural contexts.

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