

**MIAO FOLK DANCE:
A STUDY ON THE PERFORMANCE
CHARACTERISTICS OF JINJI DANCE IN
QIANDONGNAN PREFECTURE, GUIZHOU
PROVINCE**

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by

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**TARIAN RAKYAT MIAO: KAJIAN MENGENAI CIRI-CIRI
PERSEMBAHAN TARIAN JINJI DI PREFEKTUR QIANDONGNAN,
WILAYAH GUIZHOU**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti perkembangan ciri-ciri persembahan Tarian Jinji dengan memberi tumpuan kepada hubungan antara bentuk tradisional dan kontemporarinya. Walaupun Tarian Jinji kekal sebagai ekspresi utama identiti budaya masyarakat Miao, kajian akademik terhadap bagaimana adaptasi moden berinteraksi dengan makna tradisional masih kurang diberikan perhatian. Bagi mengisi jurang ini, kajian ini menganalisis komponen utama seperti gaya tarian, pergerakan, muzik, reka bentuk kostum dan tema yang mencerminkan nilai simbolik warisan budaya Miao. Berpandukan kerangka semiotik Peirce, yang mentakrifkan proses penciptaan makna melalui hubungan tiga serangkai antara objek, representamen, dan interpretan, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana unsur simbolik yang terkandung dalam persembahan menyumbang kepada pembinaan makna budaya yang lebih mendalam. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, kajian ini menggabungkan temu bual separa berstruktur, pemerhatian peserta dan dokumentasi visual. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa bentuk tradisional Tarian Jinji menekankan ketepatan ritual, formasi yang tersusun, dan penyelarasan dengan muzik Lusheng, manakala adaptasi kontemporari memperkenalkan koreografi yang lebih luas, gerak isyarat yang lebih ekspresif, serta elemen audiovisual yang dipertingkatkan. Walaupun terdapat inovasi struktur, tarian ini terus mengekalkan simbol budaya asasnya. Hasil kajian mencadangkan bahawa Tarian Jinji mengekalkan kepentingan budayanya melalui kesinambungan yang

adaptif, seterusnya menyumbang kepada daya hidup seni dan pemeliharaan warisan Miao dalam konteks moden.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving performance characteristics of Jinji Dance, focusing on the interplay between its traditional and contemporary forms. While Jinji Dance remains a core expression of Miao cultural identity, little scholarly attention has been paid to how its modern adaptations engage with traditional meanings. To address this gap, the study analyzes key components dance style, movement, music, costume design, and thematic content that reflect the symbolic values of Miao heritage. Guided by Peirce's semiotic framework, which conceptualizes meaning-making through the triadic relation of object, representamen, and interpretant, the research explores how symbolic elements embedded in performance contribute to deeper cultural meaning construction. Employing a qualitative methodology, it integrates semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation. The findings reveal that traditional Jinji Dance emphasizes ritual precision, coordinated formations, and synchronization with Lusheng music, while contemporary adaptations introduce expanded choreography, expressive gestures, and enhanced audiovisual elements. Despite these structural innovations, the dance continues to preserve its foundational cultural symbols. These results suggest that Jinji Dance maintains its cultural significance through adaptive continuity, contributing to both artistic vitality and the preservation of Miao heritage in modern contexts.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Chinese folk dance, considered a diverse cultural form, serves both as an art and as a means of storytelling, deeply embedded in the customs and traditions of China's various ethnic groups. Rooted in the country's extensive history, these dances often convey societal values, local customs, and aspects of everyday life (Liu, 2010). As Gunde (2002) notes, traditional folk dance constitutes an essential part of Chinese culture and is regarded as a valuable heritage within the nation's cultural legacy. Given this, it is evident that Chinese folk dance is not only aesthetically significant but also possesses profound historical and cultural importance, with its long history and deeply rooted origins. Moreover, Zhang and Pu (2024) further emphasise that this dance form is intricately connected with the rich traditions of Chinese ethnic communities, as it incorporates religious philosophies while profoundly reflecting spiritual significance and human psychological growth.

During ancient times, dance emerged in primitive rituals and ceremonies, with movements serving as a form of reverence when worshipping deities, celebrating harvests, or marking significant life events. For example, dances in ancient agricultural communities were developed as a means of expressing gratitude for abundant harvests or earnestly praying for favourable weather (Gunde, 2002). Over time, these ritualistic movements evolved into highly refined art forms in terms of characteristics, structure, and form, as noted by Feng (2010), enriched by the customs and lifestyles of the communities that performed them. Given this, Chinese folk dance has been deeply intertwined with the country's cultural and societal evolution. Ancient Chinese dance

and music, collectively known as Ya Yue, symbolised elegance and were used to maintain social order in dynastic China. In this context, the significance of folk dances is further emphasised, as they establish a connection between China's historical roots and contemporary society (Hung, 2011).

As folk dance evolved, it became deeply rooted in the diverse ethnic groups that make up China's cultural landscape. Officially, there are 56 recognised ethnic groups in the diverse cultural landscape of China, which greatly enhances the richness and the variety of its folk dances. Additionally, each ethnic group has its own unique dance traditions that reflect its history, values and way of life, adding to the dynamic of these folk dances. As an example, the Tibetan Cham Dance, usually performed during holy ceremonies, has a combination of intricately designed costumes, masks and movements to pass on spiritual teachings as well as myths. The embodiment of the Tibetan people's deep connection to their Buddhist faith is the foundation of this dance form, beautifully blending elements of rituals with storytelling (Hung, 2011; Wang, 1985).

Likewise, the Dai Peacock Dance, whose origins are from the Yunnan Province, exhibits the beauty and grace of the Dai people, with its elegant movements inspired by the movements of a peacock. In addition to that, this particular dance form also represents elegance, harmony as well as prosperity, which illustrates the respect and love that the Dai community has towards nature and its aesthetic sensibilities (Xu, 2023). Table 1.1 presents a detailed overview of the regional distribution of ethnic minority folk dances in China, highlighting the cultural diversity and distinct regional characteristics of various ethnic groups.

Table 1.1 The regional distribution of ethnic minority folk dances in China

Area	Tribe	Folk dance
Northeast	Manchu, Korean	Manchu Shamanic Dance, Fan Drum Dance
	Hezhen, Mongol	Fish Skin Dance, Andai Dance
	Daur, Ewenki	Daur Bow Dance, Reindeer Dance
Northwest	Hui, Dongxiang,	Hui Folk Dance, Dongxiang Folk Dance
	Tu, Sarah,	Anzhao Dance, Salar Folk Dance
	Baona, Yugur,	Bonan Sword Dance, Yugur Folk Dance
	Uyghur, Kazakh,	Meshrep Black Horse Dance, Kirgiz Eagle Dance,
	Xibe, Tajik	Xibe Bow Dance, Eagle Dance
	Uzbek, Russians	Uzbek Folk Dance, Russian Folk Dance
	Tatar	Tatar Folk Dance
Southwest	Tibetan, Monba,	Guozhuang Dance, Monba Folk Dance
	Lhoba, Qian	Lhoba Folk Dance, Sheepskin Drum Dance
	Yi, Bai	Torch Festival Dance, Ba Wang Bian Dance
	Hani, Dai,	Rice Planting Dance, Peacock Dance
	Lisu, Wa	Knife Pole Dance, Wooden Drum Dance
	Lahu, Naxi	Bamboo Horse Dance, Dongba Dance
	Jingpo, Bulang	Munao Zongge Dance, Bulang Folk Dance
	Achang, Pumi	Achang Folk Dance, Pumi Folk Dance
	Nu, Deang	Nu Folk Dance, Deang Folk Dance
	Dulong, Jino	Dulong Folk Dance, Jino Folk Dance
	Miao, Buyi	Lusheng Dance, Weaving Dance
	Dong, Shui, Gelao	Grand Song Dance, Bronze Drum Dance, Gelao Folk Dance
Central and southern	Zhuang, Yao	Bronze Drum Dance, Long Drum Dance
	Mulao, Jing	Mulao Folk Dance, Ha Festival Dance
	Tujia, Li	Hand-Waving Dance, Bamboo Pole Dance
	She, Gao Shan	Phoenix Dance, Gaoshan Folk Dance

Note. Data adapted from *History of Chinese Ethnic Minority Dance* (Ji, L., & Qiu, J., 2003).

Not only do these diverse dance traditions serve as artistic expressions, but they are also essential in safeguarding cultural identity. Among them, ethnic minority dance, as a subset of folk dance, aligns with key folk traditions, such as intergenerational transmission and strong regional and ethnic identity (Zhang, 2011). With the definition of folk dance as a traditional dance form passed down within a specific community, ethnic minority dances often originate from daily life, religious ceremonies, and festivals (Yang, 2019). Hence, both these dances serve as a means of cultural expressions, preserving historical memory and reinforcing ethnic identity, making them significant in both academic research and cultural preservation (Wang, 2023). Unlike in the Chinese context, where “ethnic dance” is a distinct category, English academic discourse typically uses the term “folk dance” to describe traditional dances across cultures (Li, 2018).

According to Jilanxin & Qiu Jiurong (2003), Northeast China’s folk dances are bold, lively, and fast-paced, reflecting the region’s nomadic lifestyle. As for the Northwest, dances are categorised as self-indulgent, ritual, or religious, all of which are characterised by dynamic movements and varied rhythms. On the other hand, most ethnic minorities typically residing in Southwest China, the dances featured yet contain a prominent dance style shaped by the natural environment and socio-economic conditions. In South-Central China, diverse folk dances are influenced by geography, history, and multi-ethnic traditions, with strong ties to ancestor worship and festivals.

Overall, these diverse regional dance traditions contribute to the wider cultural and artistic legacy of Chinese folk dance, highlighting its crucial role in preserving history and spirituality as well as social evolution. There are immensely valuable insights offered by these dances in terms of the social, economic, political, cultural and

spiritual evolution of China, at the same time, seamlessly showcasing its aesthetic values and profound connection to the natural world (Lu, 2022). Furthermore, across centuries, this dance has evolved, integrating spiritual beliefs and mystical ideas; it offers more than just visually pleasing performances. This goes in line with a suggestion made by Rahapsari (2022) that this form of dance embodies a deep spiritual significance while reflecting human psychology and fostering personal growth.

However, as Chinese civilisation began to advance, it influenced Chinese folk dance in terms of complexity and symbolism. For instance, during the Tang and Song dynasties, folk dances gained recognition as they became a part of courtly entertainment and religious practices, incorporating both local customs and artistic refinement (Li, 2006; Nickson & Picken, 2000). Meanwhile, by the Ming and Qing dynasties, folk dances were deeply embedded and were integral in festivals as well as communal celebrations, solidifying their role as cultural cornerstones (Wilcox, 2019). Today, these dances still carry on as a living tradition, highly reflecting the resilience and the adaptability of Chinese culture across centuries of change (Tan, 2000).

The development of Chinese folk dance is based on the collective effort of the labouring people over a long history, becoming an essential part of China's cultural heritage (Wilcox, 2019). Therefore, in the year 1981, the Chinese government took the initiative to implement the documentation of these dances in order to safeguard their cultural significance. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to enable national resources to execute a thorough collection and coalition of folk dances across various ethnic groups and regions. Through the implementation of this initiative, each dance movement, as well as music, settings, costumes, props, historical evolution and areas of

circulation, can be recorded in a comprehensive and detailed manner (Wei & Phanlukthao, 2023).

Consequently, as one of the most diverse cultural heritages among Chinese ethnic groups, Chinese folk dances showcase a reflection on life, labour, religious beliefs and emotional experiences of people across the many regions of China (Wilcox, 2019). Moreover, folk dances also consist of many different forms and styles, with each of them displaying significant local characteristics and ethnic cultures. That being said, folk dances are a direct reflection of the various lifestyles and customs within different communities, making each of these dances an invaluable part of China's cultural heritage (Wei & Phanlukthao, 2023). Hence, through these performances, the community is able to express its inner feelings and celebrate its unique cultural identity, contributing to the overall diversity of Chinese folk dance (Lu & Phanlukthao, 2023).

1.2 Definitions and Terms

This exploration will shed light on the contextual framework of the study and provide a clearer understanding of the specific aspects of Chinese folk dance, Miao folk dance, Jinji dance, and performance characteristics that are central to the research. By delving deeper into these key concepts, we aim to further clarify their relevance and significance within the context of the study, helping to lay a strong foundation for the analysis and interpretation that will follow.

1.2.1 Miao Tribe

Considered one of the largest minority groups in China, the Miao ethnic group ranks as the fifth largest ethnic minority. Based on recent census data, the Miao population in China has an approximate number of 9,426,007 individuals, most of them

residing in Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi, and Sichuan provinces. Out of this total, the population of Miao individuals stands at a staggering amount of 4.8 million, particularly in Guizhou Province, a region in China that is well known for its ethnic diversity as well as cultural richness (Editorial Committee of Chinese Ethnic Minorities, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, 1981). That being said, the Miao population makes up at least 12% of the overall Guizhou population, becoming the largest ethnic group in the province (Wu, 2012).

The Miao migrated southward from the Yellow River basin before 200 BCE due to forced relocations, later spreading to Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States (Culas & Micraud, 1997). Their hierarchical social structure comprises sub-groups, clans, and families, shaped by linguistic diversity, traditions, and geography (Wang, 2010). Despite their official classification as an ethnic group in the 1950s, significant internal differentiation persists, with scholars categorising them into four cultural groups, three linguistic clans, and multiple sub-groups, often distinguished by regional affiliations and traditional dress (Ye, 2022). Geography plays a crucial role in Miao identity, as ethnic distinctions are often determined by local affiliations (Xia, 2021). For example, the Jiugu Miao of Butterfly Village are historically known as strong and combative, while the Red Miao are recognised for their distinctive textile traditions. The Xiajiang Miao of Silver Village are known for stilt house construction, dry farming, and tin embroidery (Ye, 2022). These examples illustrate how Miao identity is shaped more by geography and cultural practices than formal classification systems (Schein, 2000).

At the clan level, the Miao follow a patrilineal system where ancestry is traced through the paternal line (Zhang & Zhang, 2014). On top of that, clans are integral in

the structure of the Miao communities, as they encourage a sense of belonging, religious devotion and mutual support (Schein, 2000). Typically, most Miao villages are made up of three to five clans; however, in the case of the Silver village, only one clan is dominant. Traditionally, the Miao people sustained their life by relying on subsistence agriculture, taking part in rice cultivation, herding, and hunting, as well as seasonal embroidery production (Na, 2019). The Miao women spent most of their time in agriculture, only engaging in embroidery work during the months of summer and winter, as agricultural demands during these seasons are much lower (Hansen, 1999). However, as the economy and ethnic tourism expanded, the Miao people began to affiliate themselves with wage labour as well as small-scale entrepreneurship. Moreover, by turning Miao embroidery and handicrafts into marketable products, it provided economic independence for the Miao women, allowing them to engage in local and global markets while safeguarding their cultural heritage (Zhao, 2018).

Within the context of Miao linguistic preservation, there is a major challenge as the community lacks a standardised writing system. Compared to Mandarin, a language that has undergone systematic codification, the Miao languages have primarily been passed down via oral terms. Even with the effort of transcribing the Miao language into a written form in the 1950s by the Western missionaries in Laos via the Ntawv Hmoob Romanisation system, it gained limited adoption among the Chinese Miao populations (Li, 2002). Therefore, linguistic fragmentation remains a constant issue as the younger Miao generation increasingly shifts toward Mandarin for education and commerce (Xie, 2018).

1.2.2 Miao Folk Dance

The Miao culture employs the use of artistic forms such as dance, music and textiles as a means to express their communal identity (Wu, 2024). The most notable

folk dance in the Miao community is the Lusheng Dance, which plays an important role in cultural expression. According to Li (2022), the Lusheng, a bamboo reed pipe, is a crucial instrument in Miao musical traditions, providing the tunes as an accompaniment to dance performances during festivals and communal gatherings. The Lusheng is played exclusively by men during religious ceremonies and social gatherings, with melodies that often incorporate disjunct intervals and a monophonic structure (Xie, 2024).

Among the variety of dance traditions within the ethnic communities of Qiandongnan, the Miao folk dance stands out as one of the most prominent and enduring expressions, particularly in terms of culture among the Miao people. That being said, the Miao folk dance is an important element of the ethnic group's cultural heritage, which is usually passed from one generation to the other and is usually deeply embedded in their rituals, festivals as well as daily expressions of identity. Within the Miao community, their folk dance is not considered just another art form but also serves to represent their daily lives as well as being a vital component in rituals, festivals and celebrations (Wang & Xu, 2016). Thus, the dance usually comprises vibrant movements and rhythmic footwork alongside elaborate costumes as a means of expression, often telling tales of ancestral legends, agricultural life and mythological beliefs (Yang, 2022).

As shown in Table 1.2, the Miao communities across different provinces have developed a rich variety of folk dances. The Lusheng Dance, which is usually performed during festivals, involves the synchronised movements of dancers to the melodies of the Lusheng, a bamboo reed instrument that holds spiritual significance for the Miao community (Liu & Dong, 2011). Within this context, the Lusheng is not just to be seen as a musical instrument but also serves as a medium that includes the combination of

dance, music, lyrics and different cultural expressions. That being said, this musical instrument has a vital role in highlighting the cultural heritage of this ethnic minority and hugely contributing to the integration of various cultural identities as well as values (Meng, 2016). As mentioned by Li Weilin (2022), the name of this dance is literally derived from its performance, which involves the movement of dancers while playing the lusheng, in which the tunes of the melodies gradually change from a slow to a fast tempo as the performance progresses. Therefore, with the melodies of the Lusheng intertwined with the dance, this performance preserves the oral traditions and values of the Miao community and also reflects on their cultural continuity over time.

Table 1.2 Provinces and Types of Miao Folk Dances in China

Location	Type of Miao Folk Dance
Guizhou	Wooden Drum Dance, Lusheng Dance, Jinji Dance, Gupiao Dance, Bench Dance, Bronze Drum Dance
Hunan	Flower Drum Dance, Jielong Dance, Tea Mountain Chant Dance, Monkey Drum Dance
Guangxi	Caitang Lusheng Dance, Manghao Dance, Bamboo Pole Dance, Bullfighting Dance
Yunnan	Lusheng Manghao Dance, Duijiao Dance
Sichuan	Gupiao Dance, Hair-Swinging Dance, Mountain-Stepping Dance

Note. Data adapted from *Miao Nationality* (Cen, 1993) and *A Brief History of Miao* (Editorial Committee, 1985).

Moreover, the Miao folk dance is very intertwined with the spiritual and social fabric of the community, further reflecting their collective consciousness and belief systems alongside their historical legacy. The different types of gestures and movements that make up the Miao folk dances are inspired by ancestral myths, natural

elements as well as agricultural activities, which showcase a distinct link between the people and the environment (Wang & Xu, 2012). As mentioned by Xiong As mentioned by Xiong and Li (2017), Miao folk dances bear ritualistic significance, as they can be seen as a link between the physical and spiritual realms, proving to be more than purely aesthetic or entertainment-driven performances. Their role in fostering communal bonds and facilitating cultural transmission is further emphasised, as these performances are often held during harvest festivals, communal gatherings, and sacrificial rites. The combination of the storytelling, music and dance movements represents the various nature of the Miao folk dance, simultaneously functioning as a form of artistic expression, religious devotion and historical preservation (Zhang, 2023).

Another significant dance form is the Drum Dance, distinct for its incorporation of martial arts movements and percussive music (Xiong & Li, 2016). Historically, Miao warriors performed it before battle to boost morale, invoking strength, unity, and courage (Xiong, 2007). Today, it is a ceremonial performance, particularly during the June 6th Sacrifice Festival, honouring ancestors and spirits. The energetic drumming and dynamic movements are believed to ward off evil and bring blessings to the community (Zhang, 2019). Hence, the Drum Dance, which has been preserved across centuries, serves as a great reminder of the Miao people's historical struggles, resilience and communal solidarity (Long & Wang, 2009).

In line with this, the Jinji Dance, which is also known as the Jinji dance, is another distinctive Miao folk dance, characterised by energetic movements that mimic the actions of the golden pheasant (Wei, 2006). Based on Miao mythology, which is what this dance is deeply intertwined with, the pheasant usually represents a sacred symbol of courage, protection and prosperity (Long & Wang, 2009). Moreover, this

dance form is usually carried out during important Miao festivals and celebrations, in particular those dedicated to ancestral worship or celebrating the abundance of the harvest (Lin, 2022). The choreography mirrors the actions of the golden pheasant, like the stance, pecking, flapping of wings and footwork, all of which symbolise vitality, resilience and vigilance.

With the symbolism provided through these folk dances, it offers a profound view on the richness of Miao traditions and their connection to the mythology, environment as well as communal life. Even when faced with today's rapidly changing world, efforts to safeguard their intangible heritage are implemented, whether through documentation or adapting Miao folk dances. As a result, the Miao folk dance still remains as a surviving and evolving form of art, reinforcing the community's cultural identity and collective memory for generations to come. Therefore, due to these features, this prefecture is relatively remote and less urbanised compared to the other parts of China. Hence, this made it possible for the ethnic communities to safeguard and create unique cultural practices, particularly in the realm of traditional dance, which serves as a crucial expression of their beliefs, history and communal values (Liao, 2024).

1.2.3 Traditional Dances in Qiandongnan Prefecture

Qiandongnan Prefecture, a region in the southeastern part of Guizhou Province, is considered to be one of China's most culturally significant regions. This prefecture covers a vast area of over 30,000 square kilometres and houses a variety of ethnic minority groups, such as the Miao, Dong, Buyi, Shui and Yao (Wang, 2010). Surrounded by rugged mountains, dense forests as well as flowing rivers, these geographical features not only affect the daily lives of people but also play a huge part in preserving their distinct cultural tradition (Mao, 2024).

The ethnic groups of Qiandongnan have historically maintained strong cultural traditions despite external influences (Wang & Xu, 2016). The Miao and Dong tribes, in particular, have actively preserved their unique identities, shaped by centuries of migration and adaptation (Wang, 2010). The Miao are believed to have settled in Qiandongnan to escape conflict, bringing rich traditions of music, dance, and craftsmanship (Schein, 2000). Over time, these cultural elements became central to their communal and spiritual life (Mao, 2024). Similarly, the Dong, known for their expertise in agriculture and architecture, have lived in the region for centuries, significantly contributing to its cultural diversity (Kang & Phanlukthao, 2023).

Other ethnic groups, including the Buyi, Yao, and Shao, also play vital roles in Qiandongnan's cultural heritage. Like the Miao and Dong, they have safeguarded their identities through music, dance, craftsmanship, and agricultural traditions. For instance, the Buyi perform the Huadeng (Flower Lantern) Dance, a graceful display of symbolic movements reflecting their connection to nature and communal values (Yang & Li, 2024; Xun, 1998). The Yao community preserves the Long Drum Dance, performed at weddings, festivals, and harvest celebrations. Accompanied by rhythmic drumming, it narrates cultural stories through its choreography (Chen, 2016).

That being said, the region's traditional dances are deeply intertwined with its history, functioning as both cultural narratives as well as artistic expression. is the Dong Grand Songs, a renowned a cappella polyphonic choral tradition that constitutes a significant part of Dong cultural heritage. However, the Dong Grand Songs are primarily performed in the form of choral singing rather than as a dance. Through vocal harmonies, these songs convey the history, social values, and communal emotions of the Dong people, playing a crucial role in festivals, weddings, and social gatherings

(Tang & Phaengsoi, 2024). Performers are often dressed in traditional Dong attire, adorned with intricate embroidery and silver ornaments, symbolising the ethnic identity and aesthetic heritage of the community (Yang, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Lusheng Dance is a significant cultural tradition among the Miao and Dong communities, preserved in the Qiandongnan region. This dance is traditionally performed during the Lusheng Festival and other cultural events, centring around the lusheng, a traditional reed-pipe wind instrument (Zeng, 2020). The instrument not only provides melodic accompaniment for the dance but also symbolises ethnic unity and fertility (Duan, 2017). Furthermore, the choreography, featuring dynamic steps and circular formations, embodies joy and communal cohesion, reflecting the harmonious relationship between people and nature (Tian, 2009).

In addition to these dances, the Bronze Drum dance is another traditional performance that has a significant ritualistic value among the various ethnic groups in the Qiandongnan prefecture. This dance is deeply connected with the worship of ancestors, harvest celebrations and fertility rites with historical roots dating back to ancient drum cultures of Southern China (Qin, 2020). This dance performance integrates rhythmic drumming, which is usually accompanied by symbolic gestures, serving as a narration of historical events while reinforcing spiritual connections (Jiang, 2023). Additionally, the choreography also incorporates movements that alternate between slow and high-energy movements, representing the cycle of life, seasons and renewal (Jiang, 2021).

On the other hand, the Wooden Drum Dance holds a deep significance to the agricultural practices of the Qiandongnan prefecture, particularly of the Shui and Dong ethnic groups. Performed during harvest ceremonies and rituals for prosperity, it

expresses gratitude for a bountiful crop and serves as a prayer for future abundance (Tang et al., 2017). During the performance, dancers would engage in dynamic synchronised steps that include spinning, jumping and stomping, physical motions that revolve around the upper and lower bodies, mimicking the geographical state of the land, like mountains or rivers (Tang, 2023). The percussive rhythm of the drums heightens the dance's intensity, reinforcing communal spirit and collective identity. Beyond celebrating agricultural success, the Wooden Drum Dance symbolises unity, highlighting the interdependence between people and the land while reflecting a shared cultural identity and reverence for nature (Lei & Liu, 2024).

Overall, the traditional dances of Qiandongnan are deeply rooted in the region's cultural traditions, embodying the values, beliefs and histories of its ethnic communities. Not only are these dances a form of artistic expression, but they also serve as key bridges to the past, ensuring the ancestral wisdom is preserved and communal identity is reinforced. Each one of these traditional performances is a testament to the creativity and resilience of the people of Qiandongnan as they safeguard their cultural legacy in the face of societal change as well as modernisation.

1.2.4 The Jinji Dance

The Jinji Dance, or “Golden Pheasant Dance”, is one of the many traditional folk dances of the Miao ethnic group in the Qiandongnan Prefecture of the Guizhou Province, China, which serves as a crucial cultural expression that represents the history of the community, as well as both spiritual and social values (Liu, 2023). Moreover, the Jinji Dance is another distinctive branch of the Miao Lusheng dance, as it is also characterised by the combination of the Lusheng (a traditional reed pipe) and dance, which embodies the deep respect the Miao community has towards the golden pheasant, better known as “Jinji”, which holds a cultural significance to their totemic beliefs.

Additionally, this dance form originates from the Miao people's observation of the golden pheasant and their imitation of the animal's appearance as well as movements, ensuring that each gesture serves as a reflection of the bird's grace and vitality (Tian, 2009).

As mentioned in history, this dance form is usually carried out during the ancestor worship festival which takes place once every twelve years, at the same time also executed during significant events such as wedding ceremonies, welcoming rituals and courtship events known as the "Tiao Yue dance" (Huang & Wu, 2016). In today's world, the Jinji dance still plays a very important role in Miao cultural practices, especially during the "Eating New Year's Day", or simply referred to as the Miao New Year, serving as a tool for social bonding as well as courtship among the Miao sub-clan (Wei, 2006). Therefore, all these elements showcase the dual role inhabited by the Jinji Dance as both a spiritual and a social form of activity, making it an essential part of the Miao cultural heritage.

That being said, the Jinji Dance originates from the Miao people's agricultural lifestyle and animistic beliefs, highly linking this dance form to their farming traditions as well as spiritual reverence for nature and animals. Usually, this dance will be carried out during major events like rituals and festivals which are deeply embedded with the Miao's spiritual practices. For instance, the golden pheasant in this context is seen as a symbolic figure, as it represents fertility, abundance and ancestral blessings (Wang, 2022). As time progresses, this festival undergoes an evolution, becoming an annual event with the Jinji dance becoming a highlight for celebrations like the "Eating New Year's Day" festival (Huang & Lu, 2006). Also, this dance also had an important role in courtship rituals such as the Tiao Yue dance, in which both young men and women

dancers would execute the Jinji Dance as a way to convey their affections and build relationships. Thus, this social function of the dance further signifies its importance in terms of fostering community cohesion and intergenerational connections (Wang, 2014).

Overall, the Jinji dance is a dynamic cultural expression that encompasses the history, beliefs and social values of the Miao people in the Qiandongnan Prefecture. Being a distinct branch of the Lusheng dance, deeply rooted in the totemic beliefs and agrarian lifestyle of the community, with every movement inspired by the golden pheasant (Chen, 2015). The performance characteristics of this dance form, inclusive of its choreography, costumes, as well as musical accompaniment, are all based on the cultural heritage of the community. In response to the contemporary influences, the dance advances in evolution, striking a balance between innovation and preservation. By gaining a better understanding of the Jinji Dance, we gain valuable insights into the functions of folk dance in maintaining the cultural identity and fostering communal solidarity. Thus, this research further showcases the importance of safeguarding traditional practices like the Jinji Dance as a way to honour the rich heritage of the Miao people.

1.2.5 Performance Characteristics

In dance, the performance characteristics span a wide range of elements that bring definition to the expressive, technical and aesthetic aspects of a dance form. The characteristics included here are movement quality, rhythm, spatial awareness, emotional expression, as well as cultural significance, all of which play a role in contributing to the overall impact of a performance (Critien & Ollis, 2006). Within the context of dance research, the evaluation of performance characteristics is done based on the ability of the dancer to convey meaning through movements that require a combination of technique along with artistic interpretation (Hanna, 1987). This link

between expression and skill gives another meaning to dance, as it can be viewed as another embodied form of storytelling whereby performers apply movements as a way to express emotions, cultural values and narratives.

One fundamental aspect of performance characteristics is clarity and precision, both of them being essential for allowing movements to be executed with intent and control. Critien and Ollis (2006) argue that clarity in dance enhances effective communication with the audience, as each movement becomes visually comprehensible and aligns with the choreographic intent. Additionally, sharpness and fluidity play key roles in defining movement quality, determining whether a dance style appears rigid, soft, explosive, or smooth (Koutedakis & Jamurtas, 2004). As such, all of these qualities play a big part in contributing to the performance aesthetics and also influence audience perception, further reinforcing the emotional or even thematic elements embedded in the choreography.

Apart from technical execution, musicality and rhythm also serve as essential performance characteristics that refer to the ability of the dancer to feel and express music via movements. The interaction of the dancer's with sound emphasises how rhythm plays a role in the structure of the dancer's movement sequences, contributing to the enhancement of expressiveness (Chen, 2017). Furthermore, when the dancer has the ability to synchronise movement with musical cues, it not only guarantees precision but also enhances the emotional resonance of a performance (Bläsing et al., 2012). As such, this is particularly significant in traditional dance forms, as rhythm and movement are deeply entangled with cultural rituals and symbolic gestures.

Following this, another defining characteristic of dance performance is spatial awareness as well as movement dynamics. As introduced by Laban (1988), the concept

of space is an important component of dance due to movement being categorised into various spatial dimensions such as direction, level and pathway (McCaw, 2012). With the effective use of space, the visual impact of a performance is further enhanced, allowing dancers to have the ability to create dynamic compositions via formations, travelling sequences and stage positioning (Long & Xu, 2016). In addition to this, movement dynamics, inclusive of weight, energy and tempo, contribute to the stylistic identity of a dance form, giving meaning to the genres based on their specific movement qualities (Foster, 1996).

Moreover, the combination of costume, props and visual elements also contributes to the enhancement of performance characteristics, as it ensures that the dance is contextualised within its cultural and aesthetic framework. According to Kassing (2007), movement alone does not define dance; instead, it is an integration of different artistic components such as visual arts, literature along with music. The costumes and props give an extended meaning to the vocabulary of the dancer's movements, reinforcing thematic elements and also enhancing visual appeal. In the context of traditional dance forms, the attire usually carries a profound symbolic meaning that reflects cultural heritage, social status or ritualistic significance (Kaeppeler, 2000).

As explored in scholarly discourse, the performance characteristics of dances consist of a multifaceted interplay between technique, musicality, spatial awareness and expressiveness. All of these elements contribute to the definition of the artistic and cultural dimensions of a dance form, moulding its aesthetic identity and narrative depth. In this context, the Jinji Dance of the Miao people demonstrates a connection of movement, rhythm, costume and music, all of which provide a visually and emotionally

compelling representation of the history belonging to the Miao community. With the analysis conducted on the performance characteristics of the Jinji Dance, this study allows for a better and broader understanding of the functionality of dance forms as cultural artefacts, safeguarding historical narratives as well as solidifying ethnic identity through embodied expression.

1.3 Problem Statement

As part of a distinct and culturally significant component of Miao folk traditions, the Jinji dance is facing rising challenges in sustaining its authenticity and relevance in the midst of rapid modernisation, globalisation and societal transformation (Chen, 2015). Even though previous studies have examined its historical and symbolic role in the community, there is still a notable gap in scholarly research that systematically evaluates the specific transformation in performance characteristics of the Jinji as well as the underlying sociocultural influences that contribute to these changes (Zhang, 2017). The absence of an in-depth investigation also causes the lack of a better understanding of the evolution of this folk dance from traditional forms to its contemporary adaptations, which leads to concerns about the cultural misrepresentation and lack of authenticity.

There is still existing research in regard to the Jinji Dance, most of it having a strong emphasis on the historical, artistic and ritualistic dimensions of the Jinki dance and being more focused on its cultural origins, spiritual significance and the traditional functions in the Miao society (Liu, 2023). However, one of the most distinct limitations in today's literature is how international academic attention towards the study of this specific dance form is lacking (Duan, 2017). Moreover, due to the geographical and academic isolation of this dance form, there is very minimal understanding of the

dance's evolution, which hinders its evaluation via a more comparative and interdisciplinary lens. With this cultural heritage at stake and being recognised as a global concern, it is very important to evaluate the transformation in the Jinji Dance within a broader view of cultural adaptation and resilience.

According to Huang (2017), the Jinji Dance plays an important role in terms of transmitting the Miao traditions across generations, as it embodies a distinct combination of symbolism, movement and ritual expression. Not only is this dance merely a form of art, but it also stands to represent a culture that contains historical narratives, ethnic identity and communal values. Hence, this study adopts Peirce's (1940) semiotic framework to evaluate the symbolic elements that make up the Jinji Dance, with a particular focus on its movements, costumes and musical components to have a clearer understanding of the complex socio-cultural factors that contribute to these changes. By building a connection between semiotic analysis and performance studies, this research aims to offer a very detailed understanding of the continuities as well as discontinuities between traditional and contemporary versions of the dance.

The research is focused on the Qiandongnan Prefecture in the Guizhou Province, where the Jinji Dance is still deeply significant and viewed as an intangible cultural heritage and a crucial representation of Miao cultural traditions (Tian, 2009). The rich historical legacy of Qiandongnan, along with its high density of Miao populations, makes it an ideal case study for evaluating the extraordinary dynamics of the Jinji Dance. With the study being situated within a specific geographical and cultural context, this research ensures a comprehensive yet centred exploration of the factors that influence the dance's transformation.

Furthermore, this study also seeks to enhance the understanding of both academic and cultural views of the Jinji Dance's evolving characteristics while at the same time offering a broader discourse on intangible cultural heritage protection. Moreover, the goal of this research is to provide new theoretical perspectives of both domestic and international scholars, nurturing cross-cultural dialogue as well as collaboration in the study of ethnic folk dances. The findings of the study will not only provide strategies for heritage conservation but will also serve as a starting point for future research on the dynamic link between cultural tradition, artistic evolution and social change. Thus, this research hopes to support the safeguarding as well as the revitalisation of the Jinji Dance to ensure that it is a meaningful cultural practice that continues to flourish despite contemporary transformations while taking into account its core identity and historical significance within the Miao community.

1.4 Research Questions

To scrutinise the performance attributes of the Jinji dance and to conduct a comprehensive exploration into the historical roots and kinetic features of Miao folk dance represent measures aimed at safeguarding and perpetuating the Miao dance tradition. The overarching objective is to enhance the dissemination and advocacy of Miao culture and Miao folk dances for broader public awareness and promotion.

The research questions of this study are:

1. What are the performance characteristics of Jinji dance?
2. How do the performance characteristics of traditional and contemporary Jinji Dance compare?

1.5 Research Objectives

To study the performance characteristics of the Jinji dance to preserve the cultural and social development of the Miao people.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the performance characteristics in Jinji dance.
2. To examine the performance characteristics of traditional and contemporary Jinji Dance.

1.6 Research scope

This study is specifically focused on the Jinji Dance, a significant traditional dance form within the Miao ethnic community in Qiandongnan Prefecture, Guizhou Province, China. The selection of Qiandongnan Prefecture as the research site is based on its historical and cultural importance as one of the primary birthplaces of the Miao people. As the region with the largest concentration of Miao individuals, Qiandongnan serves as a vital cultural repository for the study of Miao dance traditions. The research examines both traditional and contemporary forms of Jinji Dance, analysing key performance characteristics such as dance movements, formations, music, costumes, and thematic representations. By doing so, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how Jinji Dance has evolved over time while preserving its cultural and ritualistic significance. The investigation is framed within the socio-geographical context of Qiandongnan, ensuring a focused and comprehensive exploration of Jinji Dance's historical roots, symbolic meanings, and its transition into contemporary performance art.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Chinese folk dance holds significant cultural importance, which serves as a major expression of nationalism as well as identity. However, this study is more centred on the performance characteristics of the Miao Jinji Dance and has natural limitations that need to be acknowledged. While this study offers valuable insights into Jinji Dance, it primarily focuses on specific performance elements within the geographical and cultural context of Qiandongnan Prefecture, Guizhou Province. As a result, it does not provide an extensive evaluation of broader Miao dance traditions.

One of the limitations encountered while carrying out this research is the restricted access to primary sources because of the logistical challenges in carrying out fieldwork in isolated, mountainous regions where many of the Miao communities reside (Yan & Vickers, 2024). The problems associated with getting to these rural areas with the combination of limited research funding and travel restrictions meant that there was a lack of direct ethnographic engagement (Wang, 2019). As a result, this study will also rely on secondary sources which include government records, academic publications and previously conducted ethnographic accounts in order to gain better insights for an in-depth understanding of the Jinji dance. That being said, although this study seeks to highlight the Miao community's ability to preserve their heritage, much of its resources are based on existing literature and research that are mostly written from two main narratives: (i) state narratives and (ii) anthropological viewpoints that may not represent the voices of Miao people themselves.

Despite this, these limitations also underline the need to further investigate critical areas such as the need for primary field research, a more in-depth engagement with indigenous voices, and exploring the ever-changing dynamics between traditional