
The Artistic Characteristics of “Yi” in Yushu, Qinghai Province, and Its Application in Teaching

Juan Du*, Lan Chen

Department of Chinese Folk Dance, Beijing Dancing Academy, Beijing 100081, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: “Yi” is a folk song and dance with unique characteristics in Yushu, Qinghai Province. This paper reviews the cultural connotation, performance form, and artistic characteristics of “Yi,” and deeply analyzes its melody mode, structural characteristics, and melody form. From the angle of dance professional education, this paper probes into the practical application of Yushu “Yi” in contemporary Tibetan dance teaching, providing new ideas for the inheritance and innovation of traditional folk art.

Keywords: Kangba Tibetan; Yushu “Yi”; Folk songs and dances; Classroom teaching

Online publication: March 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, located in the hinterland of the Tibetan Plateau, is known as the “hometown of Tibetan dance in China.” It belongs to the Kangba Tibetan Area with Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, and Qamdo Prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Yushu is the meeting point of the ancient culture of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Karo culture in the south, and the Cayo culture in the north ^[1]. As the only place to pass through the ancient Road of Tang and Tibet, Yushu has always been an important window for the Tibetan area of Kangba to communicate with the outside world. The frequent exchanges of envoys and caravans on the ancient road, as well as the entry of Princess Wencheng into Tibet, promoted the exchange and integration of culture, economy, and art among different ethnic groups along the way. Due to its ancient artistic environment and long national history, the Yushu area has accumulated profound artistic deposits, especially the folk song and dance of Yushu, with its unique style, which is

obviously different from other Tibetan areas, and has gradually formed a minority culture with highly regional humanistic characteristics.

2. Concept and comparison of “Yi” in Yushu

Tibetan has a long history and a heavy national culture, folk art is dazzling, the representative songs and dances are Kang harmonic (Yi), Zhuo (Guozhuang), Dui harmonic, Nangma and Reba, and so on. Among them, the harmony is a kind of integration of music, dance, poetry, old folk songs, and dances [2]. The evolution of “harmony” is very long, and the word “harmony” in the Tibetan dictionary is interpreted as folk songs, minor keys, and later developed into the meaning of song and dance. Because of its origin and spread in the Tibetan areas of Kangba, Kangba is named “Kangba Harmony.” But in Kang District, people call it “Yi,” “Yi” and “harmonic” are different dialects of the same word, and their meanings are unified. In Sichuan, Yunnan and the Han nationality border or mixed Tibetan areas, this folk song and dance is often called “Xianzi,” because the lead dancer in the performance, usually hand Niu horn Hu (Tibetan folk Musical Instruments, Tibetan pronunciation Bewang, Chinese translation as Xianzi), and song and dance, it is called “Xianzi,” or “Xianzi dance.” The local Xianzi dance is often named after place names, such as Mangkang Xianzi, Deqin Xianzi, Batang Xianzi, and so on. Although it is the same type of dance, in Yushu area, only Nangqian County will accompany ox horn hu when dancing “Yi,” while other places such as Jiegu Town, Qingduo County, and Yushu City mostly use voice singing as the music of the dance, that is, the song must be danced, the dance must be sung, and sometimes the flute or accordion will be added for accompaniment. In addition, the “Yi” in different places in Yushu Prefecture is also different in dance form, dynamic characteristics, costumes, and so on.

3. Artistic characteristics of Yushu “Yi”

Yushu means “ruins” in Tibetan. Yushu’s song and dance are just like its name, primitive and simple. Yushuyi dance has a long history and is the accumulation of traditional Tibetan culture in Kangba, which contains the spirit, belief, and pursuit of Tibetan people. The unique performance form and unique style make Yushu song and dance significantly different from other Tibetan areas. The unrestrained melody and the passionate and unrestrained dance complement each other, showing the bold and unrestrained character of the Kangba people.

Yushuyi dance is a free, romantic, casual, and bold folk song and dance with strong entertainment and participation, which is deeply loved by the masses. Coupled with light dancing, beautiful melody, and strong local charm, it forms a unique artistic form, and Kangba people are proud of it [3]. Yushuyi dance has no restrictions on age, gender, venue, time, customs, and rituals, etc. People will dance “Yi” in the Tibetan New Year, festivals, and even after working harvest, men, women, and children can participate in it. People express their inner joy through the art form of “Yi,” and convey this song and dance with good wishes to everyone around them. At the beginning of “Yi,” there is the habit of male and female dancers stomping on the ground, and through this movement, it also

determines the initial speed and rhythm of the dance. People dancing “I” will form a circle, marching clockwise, men and women half a circle, each has its “I ban” (Tibetan transliteration, meaning lead dancer), and male “I ban” mainly. The beginning of the dance, the change of the tune, the speed, and other changes are controlled by the male “I ban.” Male “I ban” will wear two X-shaped ribbons on his shoulders, and there are strings of bells tied at the ankles of his feet; other performers wear only a ribbon and tie one or no string bells to their right foot. In addition to the decorative role, the string of bells also plays a role in unifying the rhythm and setting off the atmosphere with the dance steps. The strings of bells are larger and therefore have an emptier reverberation effect, striking a crisp, melodious metallic sound with the dance. When dancers step on the ground, their feet are like antelopes jumping, and the rhythm is bright. In the rapid steps, the dense sound of the ring sounds like an overwhelming trend, which greatly increases the appeal of the dance. When dancing “I,” the song and the dance are synchronized, and the music generally begins with the adagio, with the male and female voices alternating (the female repeats the male lyrics), and then enters allegro after several rounds of male and female singing. With the repetition of the lyrics, the rhythm of the dance will gradually accelerate and strengthen, and after the male and female voices sing the last section of the allegro, the dance will also enter the climax, and finally the song and dance will end in a warm atmosphere. In major festival celebrations, the first dance of the “I” must be the welcome dance, and in addition to the initial circle shape, the formation of the dance will also change according to the program performed. For example, in allegros, the men will rotate quickly, forming a circle, and the women’s team forms a semicircle on the outside. This formation is called “Nidaka retreat” in Tibetan, which means that the sun and the moon shine together. In addition, there are various traditional formations such as the “Duoji Jia Zhang” in the shape of a cross of gold and steel, the “Yongzhong Ye Qing” in the shape of a million shapes, and the “Donggaye Qing” in the shape of a right-hand conch ^[4], which all convey the meaning of auspicious blessings. In the tradition of Yushu, the performance of “Yi” does not have the accompaniment of drums and cymbals, but through the dancer’s neat and clear stomping movements to control the pace of the dance; With soft and lyrical male and female voices as the music of the dance, this performance form is also the unique charm of Yushu “Yi.”

The most beautiful part of dance music is human singing, which is also a major feature of Yushu song and dance with the most original ecological charm ^[5]. The whole Yi dance, from the initial soft song and slow dance, through the continuous superposition of the voice, finally reached the emotional peak of wild song and dance, and fully expressed the classical rhyme of traditional Tibetan folk songs and dances in Yushu. The songs of “Yi” are all familiar folk songs of the local people. The melody is catchy, and the melody changes with the speed, sometimes deep and melodious, sometimes beautiful and cheerful. The music basically adopts the traditional Chinese five-tone mode, of which the Yu mode is the majority, and the Gong, Shang, and Zheng modes are all. The overall fluctuation of the music is small, the melody is gentle and lyrical, and the progression of more than three degrees and four degrees is easy for people to sing. In the performance, due to the difference in male and female voice ranges, the music will be sung in the upper and lower five octaves. The main rhythm is dominated by 2/4 beats, occasionally 3/4 beats. The form structure of “Yi” is short and concise, relatively simple. Taking the “End Step” ^[6] in **Figure 1** as an example, which consists of the upper and lower two phrases, namely bars 3 to 14: The two sentences each have 6

bars, the same length, but the music within the sentence is different, the previous sentence is 2+4, the next sentence is 4+2 structure. Compared with the symmetrical sentence, this change in the air of the broken sentence makes the music more scattered, and achieves the balance of change and invariance in the limited sentence. The two rhythmic types of the sentence, with more points, the first eight and the last sixteen add a lively and jumping feeling to the gentle and graceful melody. The lyrics of “Yi” are very rich in content and are closely related to daily life, with a strong flavor of life. The lyrics include descriptions of the natural landscape, praise of the hometown, praise of the gods and greetings. It is worth mentioning that in Yushu “Yi” has almost no expression of male and female love songs.

三、颤跨、端、点综合训练组合

1. 音乐

端步法曲

1 = G $\frac{2}{4}$

藏族民歌

稍慢

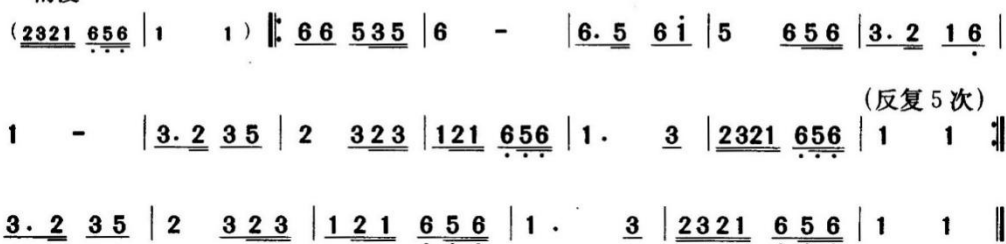


Figure 1. Example 1 “End Step”

In Yushu Prefecture, Yushu City, Chengduo County, and Nangqian County are the most prevalent areas of “Yi.” Yushu’s “Yi” has a very high degree of distinction compared with other Tibetan Xianzi performances. First of all, in the dance posture, the upper body is slightly forward, with chest but not camel, shoulder loose but not slip; The lower part of the knee is bent, the center of gravity is mainly on the ball of the foot. Such a form requires that the dancer be in a very natural and relaxed state, loose and unremitting, tight and not stiff, so as to be able to better control the body, so as to complete the chic and wild dance posture. The man’s dance steps are strong and powerful, the movement is bold and bold, and always maintains the posture of head and chest; flexible knees, agile feet, arms like eagle wings, rough action, free and easy. The woman’s action range is moderate and natural, including chest bending, like a bird pecking when leaning forward, such as lifting the head when twisting the waist. The women’s dance style is light and smooth, the dance posture is beautiful and smooth, and the body and emotion are restrained and implicit, which also matches the Tibetan women’s aesthetic. Second, the men and women performing “Yi” are gorgeously dressed and all kinds of accessories are complicated and sophisticated. Men wear long-sleeved Tibetan robes, with double sleeves extended up to 3 meters long; In addition, the Tibetan robe should be matched with a long-sleeved

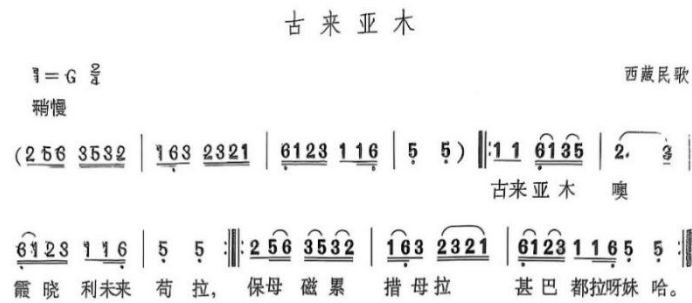


Figure 3. Example 3 “Gulaiyamu”

In addition, the basic training course of the Department of Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance of Beijing Dance Academy is the classroom teaching jointly completed by the folk band teacher, accompanied by the dance teacher on the spot ^[10]. Thanks to the participation of the live accompaniment of the band, the artistry and richness of the class are greatly improved, and the teaching method of dance is more flexible and freer. The teaching mode of music and dance integration also allows students to obtain two-way training and edification of music and dance. Mr. Wu Zuqiang once believed that music is not only a subordinate part of dance art, but good dance must have good music in order to be popular with the masses and have a long history ^[11]. In the class, the band teacher restored the color, style, and charm of folk songs and dances to the greatest extent through the dulcimer, erhu, bamboo flute, pipa, and other national instruments. At the same time, it will also imitate the skills of trill and grace note that appear in the performance of folk artists, so that the music is closer to the original ecological effect. This kind of all-round artistic training and cultivation of students is one of the important bases for Beijing Dance Academy to be the leader of similar institutions in the country in terms of talent training ^[10].

5. Conclusion

In the long historical development of Yushu, Qinghai, “Yi” retains and inherits the humanistic connotation and customs of Kangba Tibetan areas, making it an indispensable and charming representative of Tibetan folk song and dance. The unique geographical environment and the diversity of ethnic culture have created the strong ethnic customs of Yushu and made the folk art of Kangba Tibetan area colorful. With its unique artistic context, the song and dance in Yushu region vividly depicts the work and life of the Tibetan people, show the bold, simple, and brave character of the Tibetan people, and the national spirit of perseverance and optimism, which has high artistic value and research value.

Funding

This paper is the result of a school-level scientific research project of Beijing Dance Academy (0624108/042).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Gamaduo, 1999, On Tibetan Folk Dance in Yushu. Tibetan Art Studies, 1999: 15.
- [2] Qunpei JY, 2007, A New Theory of Snow and Snow, Minzu University Press of China, Beijing, 88.
- [3] Qunpei JY, 2007, Tibetan Culture and Art, Minzu University Press of China, Beijing, 111.
- [4] Wu J, Du J, Zhou S, 2019, Chinese Folk Dance Accompaniment Repertoire and Harmony Arrangement, Minzu University of China Press, 79.
- [5] Gamaduo, 2014, On the Original Ecological Folk Dance of Yushu Tibetan Nationality, China Tibetology Press, Beijing, 387.
- [6] Pan Z, (Ed.), 2001, Chinese Folk Dance Textbooks and Teaching Methods, Shanghai Music Publishing House, Shanghai, 50.
- [7] Zhuoma D, 2018, Research on Tibetan Folk Song and Dance Culture in Yushu. Journal of Beijing Dance Academy, 3: 93.
- [8] Dai G, (Ed.), 2014, Tibetan Folk Songs and Dances in Yushu No. 2: Yi, Minzu University of China Press, Beijing, 177.
- [9] Qiu L, (Ed.), 2004, Selected Chinese Folk Dances, Shanghai Music Publishing House, Shanghai, 174.
- [10] Du J, 2021, Reflections on the Teaching of Chinese Folk Dance Band. Journal of Beijing Dance Academy, 2021: 113–116.
- [11] Wu Z, 1996, The Structure of Dance Music and Others. Dance, (4): 27.

Publisher's note

Whoice Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.