

Ethnic Cultures of China

# DANCES

## OF THE CHINESE MINORITIES

By Li Beida

CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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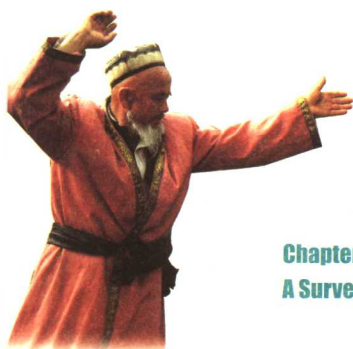
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*Ethnic Cultures of China*

DANCES OF THE CHINESE MINORITIES



**CHAPTER I** **A SURVEY OF THE DANCES**  
**OF THE CHINESE MINORITIES**

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As one of the earliest art forms of humanity, dance has its roots in all kinds of activities and is deeply ingrained in human social life. A lot of important activities, such as labor, daily living, hunting, war, sacrifice, entertainment and love, etc., can be displayed by dance. It is also an expression of psychology and a way to express a beautiful vision of life and reveal emotions.

Among the dances of the minorities in China, there are those originating in the labor of primitive society, wars between different tribes, and primitive religious activities, as well as those manifesting productive activities and social life in different development stages. Dances of the Daur and Oroqen, which imitate birds and animals, and dances of the Va and Jingpo for a sacrificial ceremony represent the primitive totemism and hunting and war in ancient times; The Shaman dance of the Hezhen and Ewenki and the Dongba dance of the Naxi reflect primitive religion; Qiangmu of the Tibetans and Chama of the Mongolians are dances using masks showing a clear religious influence; Korean and Uygur dances were originally for self-entertainment rooted in daily life, but have now become stylized performances.

Primitive dances are closely related to human's survival instinct. In ancient times, as people couldn't make sense of various mysteries, they tended to apportion nature with various supernatural powers. They showed their reverence to nature and their gods through sorcerer's dances in a trance. Thus, primitive dance came into being.

During the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC), the ancestors of the Chinese people suffered severe drought, so they danced in the intense heat to pray for timely rain. This is recorded in *Ceremonies of Chou* as "when the country encounters severe drought, sorcerers would dance to pray for rain". According to *Shuowen Dictionary* (a dictionary edited during the Eastern Han Dynasty), Yu means holding a sacrificial rite to the gods to pray for rain by waving feathers in the summer; this, then, became a dance of the waving feathers. Other minorities had similar ancient records. A minority in the north during the Zhou Dynasty often sacrificed to the gods in October by drinking and dancing day and night, earning the name Wutian. An ethnic group living on the Songnen Plain during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) offered sacrifices to the gods in the twelfth lunar month when celebrations of singing and dancing were held for days on end. This became known as Yinggu, meaning celebrating

by drums. It is by the power of singing and dancing and the mysterious emotional experience that the Chinese ancestors sought enlightenment. Because of these factors, all the ethnic groups preserved a large number of primitive religious dances. And dancing arts also become more colorful through this intense emotional experience.

Traditional Chinese culture is the nurturing source for the dances of the Chinese minorities. For thousands of years, the formation and development of the minority dances were greatly swayed by culture and customs. Different ethnic groups developed various dance arts influenced by their distinctive geographical environment, climatic conditions, as well as differences in production and life styles. The dance arts which were created collectively by the laboring people in the long course of history, and widely spread among the masses, reflect their life and struggle as well as their aesthetic sentiments, thoughts, emotions, ideals and aspirations.

Mongolians are a traditional nomadic people. They recorded their history by singing and displayed their lifestyle through dances. They said: "Andai dance makes the swan geese linger and matouqin (Mongolian stringed instrument with a scroll carved like a horse's head) draws tears from the camel's eyes." Andai is a traditional Mongolian dance. It is said that this kind of dance originated from an ancient folk legend that the daughter of an old couple in Goroschi Banner suffered from serious illness. While they invited the "bo" (god) to treat her, they kept up constant singing and dancing; as a result, the girl recovered. Later, Andai dance became a folk dance favored by the Mongolian people and serving as an important form for them to pray for blessings.

A group of young girls in white dancing elegantly with water pitchers on their heads is a familiar scene from the Korean dance *Beside the Spring*, which brims with distinctive national features and functions as a realistic portrayal of the diligent Korean women. Tradition has it that the custom of carrying a water pitcher on the head was to show that the Korean women were hardy and could resist local tyrants. This custom fully represents the unyielding character of the Korean people; what's more, it highlights the virtue, hospitality and bravery of Korean women.

The folk dance of the Tibetans, *Goxie*, has even closer relationship with their productive activities. When they reaped the highland barley or built





houses, in particular, when leveling the ground and repairing the roofs, they had to carry a wooden stick with a round stone fastened to the lower end to hammer downward. They united together by shouting and singing, which could also help to disperse their fatigue. With the sound, their feet began to dance unconsciously, which formed an embryonic form of Goxie. As a result of enrichment, revision and improvement, this has emerged as a folk dance with strong labor flavor and unique features.

Other dances, like the peacock dance of Dai performed during the Water-Sprinkling Festival, the tobacco case dance of the Yi, the nongle dance of the Koreans, Monaozong Song and Dance of the Jingpo, Mongshi Kongchi of the Manchu and Hakumai of Daur, cannot be separated from the daily lives of these ethnic groups.

Influenced by their own history, culture and regional characteristics, dances vary from one ethnic group to another. Dances of the Mongol, Kazakh, Kirgiz and other nomadic minorities in the north often display shoulder movements employed in horse riding and showing a strong rhythm. In contrast, dances of the Zhuang, Bai, Hani and Li in the south show the life of picking tea, husking rice and fishing, with soft movements and slow tempo. The Korean people engaging in field work favor a white crane with an image of longevity, and invent pliant dance steps, called crane steps. Uygurs living along the "Silk Road", who are good at moving their heads, necks, arms and waists and have fine facial expressions, have developed dances that reflect the customs of the remote Western Region. The Tajiks of the Pamirs like hawks, so it is easy to find images of hovering hawks in their dances. The peacock is as an auspicious symbol of the Dai and Tibetan, and so is represented by various props or songs and dances. These colorful dances show the psychological characteristics and aesthetic customs of their own ethnic group by different art images and traditional formats.

People can express boundless emotions in limited movements of the four limbs and develop dances of different styles. Take the postures featured in the dances of the Tibetans, Mongols and Koreans as an example: Tibetan dances are characterized by slightly bent legs, T-step and the upper part of the body leaning forward; Mongolian dances are characterized by horse-riding steps, lifted hip and relaxed waist with the back leaning backward; Korean dances are characterized by bended knee, contracted hip and straight back. The

differences can be explained from the view of national psychology, living customs and dress.


The Tibetan race is a patriarchal society with a long history. Age-old culture and civilization and an unbending spirit of enterprise have created their indomitable personality. And at the same time, living on high mountains and hilly land, they have to take to the mountain roads and, when climbing while carrying a heavy load, they must bend forward to balance. Thus, it is only natural that their dance posture has a feature of leaning forward with the upper part of the body and slightly bending the legs. In addition, their dress and living customs also determine the rhythm and scope of the movement. Usually, when they dance Xuanzi, men play the stringed instruments while women dance with their sleeves rolled up. It can be safely said that the dance movements mainly focuses on the waist.

Mongolian people live on the great prairie of the Eerguna River valley and this vast environment endows them with a rough and frank personality and broad mind. Standing there, they show an image of lifted hip and relaxed waist and leaning backward. This posture also has its root in the fact that they spend much of their time on horseback. Their heavy ethnic dress, the Mongolian gown, also shows their ferocity. Therefore, what we see on the stage is a combination of prudence, vigor and sturdiness.

Korean people living in the region between Changbaishan Mountain and the Heilongjiang River also have a long history. Due to the cold weather, the heated kang [platform for living and sleeping with heat from an external oven carried under it via flues] functions as an important venue for their daily life. Korean people are accustomed to sitting cross-legged when they stay at home, receive guests or even when doing some simple house chores. In addition, their dress has distinctive features to suit the need of this sitting posture, as shown by men's baggy trousers and women's short dress and long skirts. Having been influenced by the strict rules of Confucianism throughout the ages, women are not allowed to show off their figure. So they only stress the fine lines of the clothes. This is also reflected in their dances, i.e. restrained and non-exaggerated movements.

The dances of the minorities in China are mainly performed on grand occasions like traditional festivals, weddings and funerals, birthday banquets and so on, forming an important component in folk activities. For example,






during the Lusheng Festival of the Miao and Masilef of the Uygur, folk dances are indispensable. The fervent and cheerful atmosphere created attracts numerous participants. In return, folk dances see development through the continued folk activities.

# **DANCES OF MINORITIES**

## **CHAPTER II IN THE NORTH**





As previously noted, influenced by their own historical traditions and objective environment, dances of various ethnic groups have their distinctive features. Just like the minorities in northern China themselves, the dances show an unrestrained, fervent and bold style.

## I. Dances Characterized by Swan Walks and Willow Hand

### Korean Dance

Korean people living at the foot of Changbaishan Mountain migrated from the Korean peninsula a long time ago. As they have had frequent exchanges with the Central Plains since ancient times, they possess many similarities with the people of this region in terms of traditional culture, moral standards, religious customs and so on.

Korean people are mild and introverted. Being crane lovers, they regard cranes as birds that accompany the gods, a symbol of auspiciousness and purity greatly influenced by Taoism. It is said that the traditional clothes of Korean men including a white suit and black vest mimics the white crane with its white feathers and black wings. They also incorporate their love of the crane into their folk dances, imitating the postures of cranes, as shown in the three-beat dance steps.

Korean people have long engaged in rice farming. It is said that the gesture willow Hand in their dance is related to the practice of throwing seeds on the paddy field. When throwing seeds, the hands should rise high for the sake of an even spread. It is also said that this gesture is related to their habit of sitting cross-legged. When a Korean woman sits down, she crosses one leg with the other bent, only leaving the hands and arms to move freely. The gesture is also an extension of the crane step. The spreading out of the two arms, and stepping out in a leisurely way, looks very much like a walking crane.

Korean people are good at singing and dancing. Korean dance is marked by elegance and reserve with farming features reflected in the scope of the movements. The inner emotions of the performers are well integrated with the

physical movements. It is apt in expressing joyful feelings to the accompaniment of elegant music. Variations include nongle dance (meaning happy farmer), long drum dance, fan dance, etc.

### **Nongle Dance**

For the sake of convenient planting and management over large areas, Korean people normally employ a form of collective labor and mutual collaboration. While working in the field, they bring a flat drum and suona horn together with their farm tools. During breaks from work, they dance impromptu steps to the sprightly rhythm and thus dispel some of their fatigue through happy songs and dances. With the passage of time, this gradually developed into recreational Korean dance. A case in point is the Nongle, a dance reflecting farmers' collective labor and the joy of bringing in the harvest.


This is usually performed at festivals and on occasions of great festivity, when the farmers raise high the banner with the words "farmers are foundation of the society", carry all kinds of instruments and props to sing and dance, encouraging productive morality and expressing their happy feeling and aspirations. It has enjoyed a long history, rooted in the sacrificial activities of ancient times to pray for and celebrate the harvest.

Its embryonic form can be found in the primitive hunting and sacrificial activities. In the early stages, this dance had some religious flavor; with the advancement of farming, this artistic form became rich and colorful. The most basic characteristic of the Nongle dance is that it reflects not only the lively and fervent atmosphere, but also a spirit of working hard to achieve prosperity.

The dancing team is comprised by 29 members, led by a person holding a ling banner and nong banner, followed by the band equipped with Taiping xiao, trumpets and various drums, followed by the performers dressed up as the liangban (local tyrant), hunters, attendants, old female farmers and dancing children. The beginning, intervals and the end of the dance are all conducted by the person beating the drum.

Performances include hand drum dance and swinging xiang hat. Hand drums come in two varieties, namely those with handles and those without. Among the numerous movements of hand drum dance, a basic skill is to open a bow while running, an imitation of aiming prayers while hunting. The xiang hat is a unique prop. It is surmounted by an over-arm with an axle on one side





fastened onto a rotary screw, and with a ribbon fastened on the other side. Swinging the xiang hat is a unique, highly skilled performance. The dancer swings his head with might and main, making the ribbon revolve like the wind and forming different shapes of colored hoops around the dancer. The latter may make some skilful movements like revolving at high speed. It is said that these movements evolved from the activities of trapping animals in the hunting era.

Nongle performances include two types. One is an episodic dance while the other focuses on the skills and movements. For the former, adult and child dancers followed by hunters and those wearing masks perform episodes satirizing the ruling class by dances and mime. For the latter, the dancers perform small drum dance, xiang hat dance, long drum dance and dancing children dance.

The musical accompaniment is composed of twelve passages, each one divided into three tunes; thus, the whole nongle dance is made up of 36 tunes.

#### **Long Drum Dance**

Long drum dance also comes from the Korean ethnic group. At first, it was a component of the Nongle dance and then evolved independently, including single dance and group dance performed by women.

The long drum first emerged in China's interior and spread to the Korean Peninsula later, becoming the main percussion instrument. The Korean long drum, with two sides, two thick ends and a thin middle part, plays an important role in Korean music and dance. The player beats the right side with a colorfully-decorated bamboo twig and beats the left side with the hand. With the sound rising from the right side higher than that from the left, this instrument creates various rhythms.

When performing a long drum dance, the dancer carries the drum in front of him, beating the left side with his hand and the right side with a bamboo whip. At the climax, the performance becomes even more skillful, with many different movements as well as exquisite poses. The breath of the dancer keeps time with the drumbeat, showing the restrained beauty of Korean women. The dance steps gradually speed up and form the climax with the combination of complicated drumbeats and revolutions.

#### **Fan Dance**

This dance originated from traditional witches' customs and developed

into a performance dance. It is performed by women. Holding one or two fans (the framework being about half a meter long and the covering of the fan painted with peony), the performer expresses her deep, happy feelings by waving the fans. Driven by the arms, the wrists coil up before the body and around the head; a skip-step is frequently used during the proceedings. The posture is elegant and graceful. With the change of team formation, the dancers' fans can make up various patterns and poses. The distinctive Korean rhythm, restrained inner emotion, curved rhythm and free performance revealed in fan dance represent a harmonious blend of mobile charm and static pose. The light rhythm displays an air of happy feeling, while slow rhythm gives an enjoyment of elegance and grace.

## II. Dances of Riding and Shooting

For generations and generations, the Manchu people have lived at the foot of Changbaishan Mountain and by the Heilongjiang River and the Ewenki and Oroqen people have resided in the Hulunbuir (or Hulunbeier) League. These people have hunted since ancient times, and this activity is embodied in their dances.

### Dance of the Manchu

The Manchu ethnic group mainly lives in Liaoning Province, but with some scattered communities in Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces. The Manchu have always been good at singing and dancing. On special days or occasions like weddings, festivals, birthdays, expeditions and celebrations of some triumph, singing and dancing add to the fun.

In the 17th century, the Manchu people lived compactly in the frontier areas of the Northeast. Long residence in the mountains and forests contributed to their masterly skills of riding and hunting. And this mode of life also manifestly influenced their entertainment activities. The folk dances of the Manchu all more or less involve the gestures of riding and shooting. They often perform a Yanglie Dance on New Year's Eve with riding and shooting as its main theme. Using bows as a prop, performers circle, pursue, obstruct and intercept "fierce beasts" from all directions, and in this way praise the





bold and overwhelming heroic bearing of their ancestors. “Mangshi Kongqi” is a traditional folk dance of the Manchu, of which the “Donghai Mangshi” handed down today is a large-scale dance vividly showing the fishing and hunting life of the Donghai Nuzhen, ancestors of the Manchu.

The Manchu dances came into being against a certain historical and cultural background. Though they contain a hint of grassland culture, they mainly reflect the past life of fishing, hunting, farming, breeding and riding and shooting. In addition, there are many elements of agriculture in the dances. The Manchu people still have faith in Shamanism and the shamanistic dance is one of worship; some are vigorous and simple, some elegant and solemn and some mimic the movements of spirits and beasts. Distinct rhythms and bold and unrestrained movements typify shamanistic dance reflecting a martial spirit and paying tribute to the achievements and might of their ancestors, heroes and spirits.

Manchu dances pay attention to the organic combination of rhythms, gestures, tempo, costumes and props. The movements and postures can be summarized as: deep twisting of the waist, drawing the bow as if on horseback, holding the cheek and touching the temples and putting up a hand.

#### **Yangge Dance of the Manchu**

Yangge dance, with a claimed history of 200 years, is popular in some areas occupied by the Manchu people, such as Xinbin, Qingyuan, Fushun, Benxi, Liaoyang, Shenyang, Tieling etc of Liaoning Province. On every festival, all villages will hold large-scale Yangge performances.

Yangge has no limit in the number of performers. A Yangge team will be led by a person titled “Daziguan” (local name: “Er Laoye”), who is in charge of directing the whole team. He wears a cap with a red tassel, holds a Yunzhou (a prop in drama) and pins a broadsword on his waist. Another person called “Kelitu” wears a fur coat in reverse and hangs little bells on the back, with his face painted black and a long whip in hand; he is responsible for carving out the way. Other participants include men in plain clothes and women with a crown on which three to five butterfly pendants are pinned. Every member of the team will have a yellow, white, blue or red ribbon on their back, showing which banner they belong to (The Manchu people are divided into eight banners, namely the plain yellow banner, plain white banner, plain red banner, plain blue banner and bordered yellow banner, bordered white