



# Carnival, Discipline and Empathy: Cultural Change of Three Generations of Lotus Dance from Bakhtin's Revelry Theory

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## Abstract

From the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China to the 1950s, Lotus Dance experienced the development process from sacrificial dance to stage art. The three generations of Lotus Dance were born in different social backgrounds, and the cultural forms behind the work are constantly changing. With the help of Bakhtin's revelry theory, "Diyunzi", the rudiment of lotus dance in the Qing Dynasty, used cloud plates with religious beliefs as props and performed in squares that could reflect the identity of ordinary people, which could be summed up as "revelry" of folk culture. Lotus Lamp composed by Liu Zhiren during the New Yangko movement shows the "elitism" in dance form and content, both props and performers themselves. It belongs to the "discipline" of official culture on folk culture. In 1953's Lotus Dance, choreographed by Dai Ailian, the choreographer integrates the official diplomatic concept with the local national spirit through color contrast and multiple aesthetics, showing the "empathy" between folk culture and official culture. In the cultural evolution of Lotus Dance, we can not only see the individual dancers' attitude towards the transformation of folk dance, but also find the interactive relationship between dance and political ideology in the stage transformation of Chinese original folk dance.

## Keywords

Lotus Dance, Bakhtin, Carnivalization, Dance culture

## 1. Research background

In 1953, in the 4th World Youth and Students Peace and Friendship Festival, the dance work "Lotus Dance" created by Dai Ailian won the award, which not only made the work a classic of folk dance, but also effectively established the foundation of China's peace and diplomacy. However, "Lotus Dance" was not created by Mr. Dai Ailian at the beginning. It was based on the folk social fire art "Walking Flower Lantern" in Longdong, Gansu Province, and adapted on the basis of "Lotus Lantern" created by folk artist Liu Zhiren. Its origin can be divided into three stages: the folk dance "Diyunzi" in the Qing Dynasty, the social fire performance "Lotus Lantern" during the New Yangko Movement, and the dance work "Lotus Dance" in diplomatic activities in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. From the form of folk life dance to the form of stage performance art, the main body of its participation has changed from "common people" to "people" and then to "country".

Before the lotus dance appeared on the stage in the form of a work, it was only a sacrificial ritual activity to express the willingness of the participating subjects, just as mentioned in the carnival theory of the former Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin "Carnival Rituals of the Spirit of Life". Bakhtin believes that the dominance of official Christian thought led to the "monologue" situation in the field of medieval ideology, that is, official culture is

"obvious" while folk culture is "hidden". The Equality Consciousness of Official Culture (Zhou Weizhong, 2006). Although this theory was born in the special era background of European society, it cannot be used to directly explain the cultural phenomenon of our country, but if we only start from the "carnivalization" itself, it is a kind of development that people are dissatisfied with the status quo of life or satisfy a certain desire. From this point of view, spiritual activities that can completely relax the self have similar origins and practical significance to the original folk dances and social fire activities in our country. When the original ecological dance is on the stage after the official transformation, it will form a new interaction between official culture and folk culture. Therefore, in the course of "Lotus Dance" from the original ecology to the stage, its cultural form is also accompanied by the blending and evolution of official culture and folk culture.

## 2. "Diyunzi" in the Qing Dynasty: a carnival of folk culture

In ancient times, people danced mostly for the purpose of survival, especially under the strict hierarchy of feudal society, the common people at the bottom of society could not decide their own destiny, and could only rely on sacrificial activities to appease their hearts. Qingyang City, Gansu Province in the Qing Dynasty "Diyunzi" is one of them. According to the memories of folk artists, this kind of dance had already reached a certain scale in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. On the one hand, they pray to the ghosts and gods in the sky to meet their material needs through sacrificial dances, such as: rain gods can bring good harvests; on the other hand, they release the depression of the bottom class in this almost crazy dance, to meet the spiritual needs of the self. As Bakhtin puts it: "Throughout the carnival period, the rules, taboos and restrictions that determined the institution and order of ordinary life, that is, of non-carnival life, were all changed: first of all, the hierarchy and the All forms of fear, worship, piety, ceremonies, etc., connected with it, that is, all that is determined by different social classes and other kinds of inequalities between people" (Bakhtin, 2010). Therefore, the "carnival" of the common people in the sacrificial dance at that time was different from the joy and freedom shown by people in the fire art of the folk society today. In spirit, it contains a sense of resistance and return, representing the "carnival" of folk culture.

### 2.1 Begging for rain on a cloud disk contains folk beliefs

Influenced by ancient religious culture, people in Qingyang believe in ghosts and gods. When their harvests are not good, they think how to pretend to be a rain god with magical powers, who can gather dark clouds to bring rain to people. So people made a large plate similar to clouds, tied two long enough ropes to the front, back, left, and right sides of the cloud plate, and tied the other end to their waists, so that the cloud plate would naturally hang down to their feet. They hang big cloud disks on their waists, hold lotus flowers in one hand, and command flags in the other, and slowly wave the command flags along with the drums and gongs. Local people call this dance "Yunduozi" and "Diyouzi", also known as "Dipiaoer", "Diyunzi" and "Yunyingzi". Different from the Yuanpan after liberation, the props under the feet of "Diyunzi" in the late Qing Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty are square, including whisks and lotus lanterns, and the performance time is mostly at night. Some scholars mentioned that on the night of the "Liaoxin Festival" on the 23rd day of the first lunar month, the entire Shehuo team would bring all the props made of paper in the Shehuo to the designated place in the village to gather for "Lianxin Festival" to carry out social activities. Ceremony of unloading the fire (Yan Yanan, 2022). After the performance of "Diyunzi", the local villagers will gather in a relatively open place, put the paper props (cloud disk, lotus, lotus lantern) used in the lotus dance into them and burn them all, and then throw the ashes into the sky. Throwing up means that all diseases will be swept away, and after the ashes fall, the shape of the ashes will be used to judge the harvest of the coming year. It can be seen that the "diyunzi" used as a sacrificial activity in the Qing Dynasty had a distinct purpose. Faith and the sustenance of the vision of a better life, separated from one's own routine life, is to some extent an "upside-down life", a "reverse world" (Bakhtin, 2010).

### 2.2 The location of the square highlights the civilian identity

"The source of carnivalization is the carnival itself" (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 144). And the "basic place of the carnival is the square and the streets adjacent to it" (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 144), this is "Because the carnival, according to its idea, is universal and inclusive", and the square is the symbol of the whole people. In the "Diyunzi" activities in the late Qing Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty, common people did not regard it as a performing art, but a ritual closely related to their personal lives. Gao Mei, chairman of the Qingyang City Dance Association, mentioned: "Qing-

cheng County in Qingyang does have the "Diyunzi" dance, which is the early lotus dance. "Diyunzi" is mainly run by children, there is no lotus on the cloud plate, and the exquisite Shehuo team will draw big clouds on the plate under their feet, symbolizing that the gods in the sky have come to this earth with auspicious clouds, to protect this piece of water and soil, and the weather will be smooth. I was invited to take a walk in the courtyard of the villa, which symbolizes inviting the gods to my courtyard, which is actually sacrificial" (Yan Yanan, 2022). From her description, it can be concluded that the activities of "Diyunzi" are mostly set up in common people's homes, streets, yards, etc. It exists as a means for the common people to pray for blessings, and it is a kind of activity that everyone can participate in. Sacrificial activities, therefore, the location of the activity does not need to be carefully selected or arranged, which reflects a certain degree of inclusiveness and universality, and highlights the "carnival" characteristics of folk culture at this stage.

### **3. "Lotus Lantern" Edited and Created by Liu Zhiren: The Discipline of Official Culture to Folk Culture**

Since Comrade Mao Zedong proposed that literature and art serve politics at the Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium in 1942, the vigorous New Yangko Movement has been launched, and the concept of art workers has undergone a complete change. Their cognition is different from that of civilians in the feudal society. The erasure of class consciousness brought about their inner "carnival" for the individual and their support for the Chinese Communist Party as a collective. Although the literature and art of this period were dominated by the tendency of "serving the workers, peasants and soldiers", in the final analysis, the civil society fire at this time no longer existed purely as religious sacrificial activities in the feudal society, but faced the transformation from life rituals to The transformation of stage art is also accompanied by the reality that the "carnival" of the common people is gradually "disciplined" by the official political discourse. The official discipline takes Yangko as the carrier, and through the intellectuals in the carnival open and infinitely large square, it is finally successfully delivered to the majority of the people. Therefore, the Yan'an New Yangko performance has become the achievement of official discipline. Importantly, the ritual of power, or discipline, has become the main nature and function of the official carnival ceremony (Guo Yuqiong, 2006).

Liu Zhiren, the local "shehuo head" in Longdong, was one of the representatives. He took the lead in re-arranging "Diyunzi", incorporating it into the relevant content of revolutionary propaganda, and named it "Lotus Lantern dance". At this time, "Lotus Dance" still existed in the form of social fire, but the identities and discourses of the participants had undergone qualitative changes. They were no longer the common people who used dance to satisfy their repressed desires, but used Dance participates in politics of the masses of the people. It needs to be emphasized that "official intervention" does not necessarily mean a mandatory adaptation of the work. Since Liu Zhiren has the dual identities of a folk artist and a revolutionary propagandist, although his "Lotus Lantern" has made the work "elite" at the physical level. Discipline", but to a certain extent, it also retains some original folk cultural symbols.

#### **3.1 The lotus image endowed with the spirit of the times**

From the point of view of the dance form, Liu Zhiren changed the original cloud pan into a lotus pan, and inserted a large lotus lantern on the lotus pan seat, and tied it around his waist with two ropes. Every night, the dancers light the lotus lanterns and move quickly with flowery steps, accompanied by green ribbons on their arms, like lotus fairies swimming on the water. Different from the previous "Diyunzi", the former is to show that the rain god descends from the sky, bringing people a good harvest or curing diseases and disasters, so the "cloud disk" is used to imitate the image of "male gods". The "Lotus Lantern" edited by Liu Zhiren shows the growth of lotus in the water, which not only symbolizes the prosperity of the new China and the prosperity of the revolutionary cause, but also the meaning of having many children and grandchildren in the local area. Therefore, the holy and pure image of "lotus flower plate" is used to simulate Lotus Fairy. The local villagers said: "To the east of our Nancang village there is a big temple where Guanyin sits on a lotus platform, and to the west there is a lotus pond. Village head Liu probably got inspiration from the gods and invited the fairies down to earth!" (Gao Mei, Wang Boyi, & Wang Lishen, 2021). And he often uses "dragon wagging tail", "two dragons spit beads", "swallow shuttle" in formation Cross set", etc., to reflect the real life of the people. Therefore, both the form and props of "Lotus Lantern" reflect a clear professional tendency, and the spirit of the times it is endowed with is also based on the promotion of an-

ti-Japanese and national salvation and expressing the joy of the founding of New China.

It can be seen that although there was infiltration of official discourse at this stage, Liu Zhiren did not fully use "Lotus Lantern" as a tool for his political propaganda, and also retained some religious beliefs and totem worship in the early "Diyunzi" activities.

### **3.2 Female Participants Representing Revolutionary Conceptions**

In addition to the "discipline" on the physical level of dance, Liu Zhiren's choice of women to perform "Lotus Lantern" is also related to the gender awareness under the influence of official culture at that time. In the 1940s, under the background of the Anti-Japanese War and the New Yangko Movement, the gender concept in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region was updated. People not only dispelled the traditional concept of "men are superior to women", but the status of women was also raised to a certain height due to the political situation: they had to take the initiative to get out of the "old-style family", get rid of "trivial work of oil, salt, firewood and rice" and "serving as concubines". Being a slave, in order to adapt to the times and truly serve the society. The organizers also realize that they should pay attention to the women in the poor and remote areas, and move their eyes from the "points" and "lines" of the city to the vast "faces" of the countryside and mountains", and use the "power of education" to promote more women "Progress and Awakening" (Shugan, 1944).

Therefore, the author believes that there are two reasons why Liu Zhiren's "Lotus Lantern" is performed in the form of a female group dance: first, it is out of the need to beautify the dance. In the process of developing new Yangko and transforming old Yangko, the New Yangko Movement also plays a role in improving the people's aesthetics. For example, when some scholars mentioned the reason for the naming of the Yangge drama "Brothers and Sisters Opening up Wasteland", "decided to remove its flirting elements. I wanted to write it as a husband and wife, but changed it to brother and sister to avoid the feeling of flirting" (Zhang Geng, 1962). Therefore, Liu Zhiren's transformation of the new Yangko naturally needs to weaken the content of the previous "Diyunzi" that damages the image of the working people, and change it to a form that the public likes to see; Women's participation in Shehuo art can mobilize more revolutionary forces. This can also be confirmed in his other works. For example, in the lyrics of "Busy December", it is written: "The New Year comes in the first month, / Every village is full of fire. / It is entertainment and publicity, / Encourage everyone More production. / In February, it's sunny, / Changing jobs and everyone works. / Men open up wasteland and women's spinning thread, / A piece of prosperity is in sight..." (Zhang Wenjin, 2021) As one of the indispensable roles in the production movement, women also bear the same social responsibility as men responsibility. Therefore, the change of gender also reflects the "discipline" of folk culture by official culture.

It is worth pointing out that, according to Bakhtin's cultural poetics, "carnival" is essentially ridicule, contempt and abandonment of discipline, but at this stage due to China's special social background, the "people's carnival" and "carnival" in "Lotus Lantern" "Official discipline" almost has a shared discourse field. Women's participation in the performance of "Lotus Lantern" is not only the general trend of revolution, but also the release of people's self-consciousness.

### **4. "Lotus Dance" edited by Dai Ailian: Empathy between folk culture and official culture**

Ranci re believes that there is no completely "political" politics, and there is no completely "artistic" art, and the relationship between the two has a definite discussion value. The study of the relationship between art and politics is actually an exploration of the relationship between "political art" and "artistic politics" (Ranci re, 2021). If the "Lotus Lantern" edited by Liu Zhiren is in the transition stage of politics penetrating art, then "Lotus Dance" edited and created by Dai Ailian more clearly reflects the integration of politics and art. At the beginning of the founding of New China, Dai Ailian went to Qingyang City, Gansu Province to collect local lotus dances in order to respond to Premier Zhou Enlai's suggestion and to add luster to the country's image for New China's diplomacy. After adapting Liu Zhiren's version of "Lotus Lantern", a new version was created. "Lotus Dance" won the second prize at the 4th "World Youth and Students Peace and Friendship Festival" held in Bucharest, Mania in 1953.

Different from "Lotus Lantern", although "Lotus Dance" in the process of political discourse intervention, the original folk religious rituals no longer exist, but the national spirit of the Chinese nation of "harmony is beauty" has been more profoundly continued. When the performance field of "Lotus Dance" moves from the square to the stage, and the dance form changes from popular to exquisite, the two discourses of the official and the folk form a

joint force. This is the "empathy" between the country and the people, and between the country and the country. "Empathy" between official culture and folk culture.



Figure 1. "Lotus Dance" created by Dai Ailian.

#### 4.1 The contrast of pink and white symbolizes the "unity" in China

"National spirit is the spiritual pillar on which a nation depends for its survival and development. It is not only a spiritual bond of a nation, but also a kind of social consciousness and a reflection of a nation's social existence and social life" (Ouyang Hongsheng, 2011). "To neutralize" is not only an important feature of Chinese traditional culture, but also the value and ideal pursuit of the Chinese nation. The "Lotus Dance" edited and created by Dai Ailian uses the image of the lotus, which carries the spirit of "neutralization" of the Chinese nation, to symbolize the harmonious scene of multi-ethnic unity in China.

The dancer wears a long skirt with a lotus plate, and there is a graceful lotus at each of the four corners of the plate. They move in small steps in a circle, like lotus fairies dancing in the water. Dai Ailian believes that when a lotus grows in water, it cannot be static, but must move with the wind and sway with the water. Therefore, she put the eight girls in the group dance on stage one by one in the order of "dragon wagging its tail", and the changes were smooth, reflecting the beauty and lightness of the lotus "in the water". Then, she made creations on the costumes. The clothes of the seven girls were pink, representing "pink lotus", and among them, the color of the costumes of the leading dancers was white, representing "white lotus" (Li Yanhong, 2008). The director uses pink and white costumes to shape the image of the lotus fairy. The group dance uses the pink lotus to symbolize the people, and the solo dance uses the white lotus to symbolize the motherland. "The white lotus loves the pink lotus, and the pink lotus respects the white lotus" (Dai Ailian & Luo Bin, 2003), to express the deep affection of the Chinese nation for the motherland.

The reason why the image of the characters is created through the image of pink lotus and white lotus is directly related to the "Asia-Pacific Regional Peace Conference" held in my country in 1952. Because the Indian people love lotus, and the lotus is also used as the teaching flower in the Buddhism they believe in, Premier Zhou Enlai proposed to the dance team of the Central Academy of Drama that he hoped that the troupe could perform a dance with the image of a lotus during the peace conference. The college quickly formed the "Lotus Dance" creation group. In 1953, in order to prepare to participate in the dance program of the World Youth and Students Peace and Friendship Gala that year, Dai Ailian made a new artistic conception for "Lotus Dance": "The blue sky is high, the green water is long, the lotus faces the sun, and the wind blows the thousand-mile fragrance. Motherland, you are shining brightly, and you are blooming like a lotus." This work integrates the image of the lotus into the theme of the people's wish for the peaceful reunification of the motherland, and combines the political ideology of the time with the people's demands to form a visual and spiritual double "community".

#### 4.2 Diverse aesthetics highlight international "harmony"

From October 19 to 30, 1954, Jawaharlal Nehru, the supreme leader of India and the first prime minister, paid a

friendly visit to China at the invitation of the government of the People's Republic of China, and then the Chinese delegation went to India to communicate. The Indian people believe in Buddhism. When Prime Minister Nehru led the Indian government delegation to visit China to watch the "Lotus Dance", facing the lotus symbolizing auspiciousness and admiring the art of immortal postures, the whole group put their hands together for a long time (Long, March No. 1, 2005).

The author believes that the reason why this work can arouse the empathy of the Indian people is not only the factor of shaping the image of the lotus itself, but also has a certain relationship with the Buddhist aesthetics reflected in the dance costumes. Dai Ailian mentioned: "I invited two famous painters - Yu Feng and Zhang Zhengyu to design the costumes. My idea is to use the costumes of 'Tang Dynasty girls' as elements." (Dai Ailian, Luo Bin, & Wu Jingshu, 2003). Under the social background of Buddhist culture spreading eastward and multi-ethnic integration, women's clothing in the Tang Dynasty formed its unique characteristics: beautiful. For this reason, women lift their waists to their chests, tie them under their armpits, and let their skirts hang down to the ground. Skirts are tight from the hips up to the body, and loose and stretch below the hips, fully showing the graceful curves of women (Hu Rong, 2003). The cloaks worn by women are also drawn from Buddhist statues of Bodhisattvas. At first, they symbolized the noble clothes of Bodhisattvas, and also expressed the auspicious meaning of prolonging life (Tan Simeng, 2010). This kind of clothing design not only reflects a strong oriental aesthetic, but also demonstrates my country's open, free and eclectic diplomatic concept. Dai Ailian recalled in her memoirs Premier Zhou Enlai's instructions to her before the delegation visited India: "The main purpose of this tour is to enhance friendship. No matter where we go, we must respect the local ethnic culture and learn from them." Therefore, the choice of costumes for "Girls of the Tang Dynasty" is not accidental, but a choice made by the director after inclusive understanding and respect for national culture. When the domestic official culture and folk culture form a "resonance", the "empathy" mechanism can be formed between countries at the spiritual level, so that the voice of China can continue to echo in the international context.



Figure 2. Contemporary revival of "Lotus Dance".

## 5. Conclusion

As Bakhtin said: "At the carnival, the image of fire is profoundly dual. This is the fire that destroys the world and revives it at the same time." (Bakhtin, 2010). For contemporary Chinese folk dance creation, it also faces the problems of "destruction" and "resurrection". Whether it is "Diyunzi" in the Qing Dynasty, Liu Zhiren's "Lotus Lantern", or Dai Ailian's "Lotus Dance", they have not extinguished the image and meaning of "fire" in the original social fire activities. What has changed is the dance form, which remains unchanged is the national spirit. While the old dance form was "destroyed", the cultural form continued to be reborn, bringing about the "resurrection" of the spirit of the Chinese nation. In this process, there are not only the intervention of official discourse, but also the creative tendency of individual dancers, and the appeal of folk discourse. How to preserve the roots of national culture in the process of moving from folk customs to national mainstream is a question that every dance worker needs to think deeply about. Through the classic work "Lotus Dance", we can see that the infiltration of official discourse into folk

discourse is not rigid and rigid, but a dynamic revival of the original cultural symbols of the folk, so that the two cultures form a kind of The benign interactive mechanism promotes the work to go abroad and face the world, ushering in the "joy" and "win-win" between the government and the people.

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