

GUOZHUANG: DANCE CHARACTERISTICS OF TIBETAN WOMEN IN THE DANBA AREA, CHANGDU, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the origins and characteristics of the Guozhuang dance among Tibetan women in Danba and Chamdo. Focusing on the Guozhuang dances of these two regions, the study analyzes them from the perspectives of dance morphology and cultural anthropology through fieldwork and literature review.

The research reveals that the Guozhuang dances of the two regions share a common origin but diverge in development: both originated from primitive sacrificial rituals and agricultural labor. Danba Guozhuang was influenced by the Jiarong agricultural civilization and deeply intertwined with agricultural seasons, while Chamdo Guozhuang relied on the Ancient Tea Horse Road, integrating nomadic and commercial cultures.

In terms of dance characteristics, both regions share the core rhythm of "bending before moving, with trembling within the bend" and the paradigm of dancing in a circle, while also exhibiting distinct regional differences. This study clarifies the origins and characteristics of the Guozhuang dances in these two regions, highlighting the central role of women in their transmission, and providing theoretical reference for intangible cultural heritage protection and dance teaching.

Keywords: Dance characteristics, Danba, Chamdo, Tibetan women's dance, Guozhuang dance, intangible cultural heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan dance is one of the most lively and culturally rich art forms in China's intangible cultural heritage, expressing centuries of history, religious belief, and social identity throughout the Qinghai-Tibet plateau. As one of China's 56 officially recognised ethnic minorities, the Tibetan people—distributed across the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan—have developed a distinct artistic tradition shaped by the convergence of Bon religion, Tibetan Buddhism, nomadic and agrarian lifestyles, and successive historical periods' political transformations (Ma Lihua, 2018). At the heart of this tradition is the Guozhuang dance, a communal circle dance form that is profoundly ingrained in ceremonies, festivals, weddings, funerals, and daily social life (Liu et al., 2012; Zhou, 2002). Whereas formalized theatrical dance, Guozhuang is a live

cultural medium that Tibetan communities use to retain collective memory, negotiate identity, and pass down cultural knowledge between generations (Neveu Kringelbach & Skinner, 2012; Lin et al., 2023).

Despite having a similar root, Guozhuang dance has developed into diverse regional representations throughout the Tibetan cultural landscape (Liu et al., 2012). The Danba area of Sichuan, known for its sedentary agricultural villages and complicated matrilineal social systems (Darragon, 2021; Wu et al., 2013), has generated a Guozhuang style that emphasises delicate footwork, subtle wrist motions, and female-led ceremonial performance based on farming rhythms and ritual life (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2019). The Changdu (Chamdo) area of Tibet Autonomous area, inspired by nomadic customs, bustling trading routes, and a heritage of cross-cultural interchange along the historic Tea Horse Road (Chen, 2020; Nima Tsering, 2017), stands out for its powerful sleeve motions, broad gestures, and improvisational performance intensity (Zhang, 2020; Zhou, 2021). These two regional phrases thus offer a classic example of "homologous divergence"—a similar cultural root that has evolved into significantly different embodied vocabularies in response to differing ecological, social, and historical situations (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Liu, 2018).

Tibetan women play a special role in this cultural context. Women in Danba and Changdu are not just performers, but also main custodians of Guozhuang tradition, directing communal rituals, disseminating choreographic expertise via informal and institutional channels, and influencing the emotional register of ritual situations (Henrion-Dourcy, 2004; Gler, 2006). In traditional agricultural villages, the movement aspects of Guozhuang dance depict women's duties in farming, family administration, and ceremonial organising directly (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2019). In contemporary settings, this custodianship has been formalised through cultural associations and intangible cultural heritage training programs, putting women at the crossroads of traditional practice and modern heritage governance (Howard, 2016; Lin et al., 2023). Despite their importance, the gendered aspects of Guozhuang transmission and performance have received little academic attention, particularly in comparative and regional contexts (Henrion-Dourcy, 2004; Zhang, 2019). The current study fills this gap by looking at the historical evolution and dancing styles of Tibetan women's Guozhuang performances in the Danba and Changdu districts. This study adds to the anthropology of dance, intangible cultural heritage studies, and the growing body of scholarship on gender, embodiment, and cultural identity in Chinese ethnic minority communities by placing these regional expressions in their respective socio-cultural, ecological, and historical contexts (Neveu Kringelbach & Skinner, 2012; Mao et al., 2025).

Existing research on Tibetan dance has focused on either large ethnographic survey of Tibetan performance culture or formalistic investigations of individual dance forms like Qiangmu or stage-adapted Guozhuang (Pearlman, 2002; Liu et al., 2012). There are few comparative studies that look at regional diversity within a single dance genre, especially in terms of social, ecological, and gendered elements (Zhang, 2020; Ma, 2020). While the Danba and Changdu areas are both recognised as important hubs of Guozhuang practice, they have seldom been researched together in a systematic manner (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2020). As a result, scholarly research does not adequately record the distinctive movement vocabularies, ritual functions, transmission processes, and gender dynamics that define these two regional traditions (Zhang, 2019; Zhou, 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, the divergence between Danba and Changdu Guozhuang raises fundamental questions about the relationship between bodily practice and ecological context, between collective memory and choreographic form, and between tradition and innovation in the context of modernization and urbanization (Buckland, 1999; Neveu Kringelbach & Skinner, 2012). These questions are of broad relevance to dance anthropology, heritage studies, and ethnic minority cultural policy (Howard, 2016; Lin et al., 2023), yet they have not been addressed through sustained comparative inquiry focused on these two regions and the women who transmit their respective traditions. This scholastic divide has practical ramifications. Without extensive, regionally diverse recording of Guozhuang traditions, conservation initiatives run the risk of imposing homogenised norms that flatten the artistic uniqueness of these dances (Reyes & Wang, 2025; UNESCO, 2003). Heritage practitioners and curriculum creators lack the comparative data required to create focused preservation projects or

culturally grounded educational materials (Howard, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of gender-focused research obscures the essential role that women have played—and continue to play—in preserving Guozhuang as a living practice rather than a museum-worthy artefact (Henrion-Dourcy, 2004; Zhang, 2019).

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the historical context of Guozhuang dance as performed by Tibetan women in the People's Republic of China's Danba and Changdu regions, tracing the social, religious, ecological, and political factors that shaped the development of each regional tradition from the Tubo period to the present.

2. To examine and compare the dance forms of Tibetan women performing Guozhuang in the Danba and Changdu regions, with a focus on movement vocabulary, choreographic structure, ritual function, and transmission practices, in order to shed light on the mechanisms by which a shared cultural form has given rise to distinct regional expressions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Framework of Tibetan Regionalism

The idea of regionalism in Tibetan studies has undergone major theoretical alteration over the last century, shifting from a geographically deterministic to a culturally produced framework. Liu Qi (2018) traces this intellectual trajectory in her account of "Xizang Frontier Society Studies," demonstrating how early twentieth-century scholarship reduced regional identity to natural boundaries, defining U-Tsang as the agricultural basin of the Yarlung Zangbo River, Kham as the agro-pastoral transitional zone of the Hengduan Mountains, and Amdo as the nomadic grassland region of the northern plateau. According to Liu Qi (2018), this static definition ignores the changing function of cultural practice in determining regional belonging.

Wang Mingke (2013) and Fei Xiaotong (2007) addressed the theoretical constraints of geographical determinism, contributing to ethnic identity theory and the idea of "rural China" with a socially based sense of belonging. Drawing on these frameworks, Ma Rong (2016) articulated how regional sentiment in Tibet operates through cultural expression rather than spatial enclosure, which was consistent with Wang Jianmin's (2019) historical tracing of regionalism as an evolving academic paradigm rather than a fixed category. From this approach, Zhou Daming (2015) experimentally investigated the establishment of regional identity, while Zhang Lijuan (2017) focused on the interaction between Tibetan regionalism and cultural identity.

As a result, the three major Tibetan areas are now recognised as overlapping cultural groups with diverse but interconnected symbolic repertoires, rather than mutually exclusive geographical divisions. U-Tsang's identity is based on religious culture, which is organized around sacred locations like Jokhang Temple and Tashilhunpo Monastery and preserved via pilgrimage and Gelugpa ritual practice (Liu Qi, 2018; Channuwong et al., 2018; Wang Jianmin, 2019). Kham's regionalism, on the other hand, is marked by multicultural integration, the result of its historical position at the crossroads of Tibetan, Han, and Naxi cultural networks, which were perpetuated by trade links along the Ancient Tea-Horse Road (Zhou Daming, 2015; Zhang Lijuan, 2017).

Amdo's identity shows a dual character of nomadic vigour and Sino-Tibetan interchange, as evidenced by horse racing festivals, grassland melodies, and a long history of contact with Central Plains dynasties (Liu Qi, 2018; Li Peilin, 2010). Liu Qi (2018) describes the link between these regional identities as "synergistic origin" — each supported by similar cultural foundations such as the Tibetan language and key doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism, but expressing those foundations via regionally distinct behaviours. This dialectical structure, described by Liu Qi (2018) and Wang Mingke (2013) as a

unity of diversity and integrity, serves as the theoretical foundation for comparing dance styles throughout Tibetan subregions.

2.2 Tibetan Dance Form: Theoretical Perspectives

Qiangba Qujie (2013) has most comprehensively systematised the concept of dance form in Tibetan studies, defining it as "a body dynamics system with Tibetan cultural genes" that encompasses four interrelated dimensions: rhythmic foundation, body language, prop usage, and regional style. This definition goes beyond descriptive cataloguing to present dance form as a culturally encoded system in which bodily movement conveys social, religious, and ecological meaning. In terms of movement rhythm, Qiangba Qujie (2013) recognises "knee flexion and tremors" as the primary trademark of Tibetan dance, distinguishing it from all other ethnic dance traditions in China. Wu Xiaobang (2008) lends theoretical credence to this assertion, claiming that movement rhythm serves as the "soul" of dance, establishing the entire artistic aspect of the performance. The physical demands of high-altitude mountain traversal, combined with the constraints imposed by the weight and volume of traditional Tibetan robes, resulted in a movement logic emphasising "flexion followed by tremors before movement" (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Luo Xiongyan, 2011). Duoqi Ouzhu (2017) estimated that this tremor occurs 8-15 times per minute across dance genres, while Tashi Dajie (2014) stated that in the Danba and Changdu regions, the frequency typically falls between 10 and 12 times per minute, reflecting the Dongkang area's unique geographical and lifestyle characteristics.

Qiangba Qujie (2013) classifies Tibetan dance's body language system into three modules: gestural symbols, footwork, and body position. Hand gestures include multiple connections to religious imagery and everyday life, as seen by the "Buddha's Hand" gesture, which originated in Tibetan Buddhist ceremony (Yuan He, 2016). Zhang Li (2019) reports that female dancers in Tibetan traditions typically exhibit more polished and controlled hand gestures than male performers, which is directly applicable to a comparative examination of women's Guozhuang performance. Footwork patterns revolve around "stepping, brushing, and tapping," with regional variations in intensity: Kham Guozhuang uses forceful strides, whereas U-Tsang Xianzi uses softer, more elegant steps (Qiangba Qujie, 2013). Tashi Dajie (2014) adds that Changdu Guozhuang's "ground-stamping" method is more forceful than Danba's, and it is commonly synchronised with rhythmic clapping. Body posture in Tibetan dance traditions emphasises "rounded chest and drooping shoulders," a physical orientation that reflects both climatic adaptation (limb contraction for warmth in cold plateau conditions) and cultural values of humility and solemnity (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Luo Xiongyan, 2011). Qiangba Qujie (2013) contends that props are more than just accessories; they are structural components of movement vocabulary. The long-sleeved Tibetan robe, in particular, opens up a range of expressive options — "raised arms symbolising the blue sky," sleeve wrapping, and sleeve swaying — that greatly expand the visual and narrative elements of dance. Zhang Li (2019) particularly observes that the range of sleeve-lifting and rotation in Guozhuang performances varies between Danba and Changdu due to local costume difference, a distinction with clear artistic ramifications.

At the regional level, Qiangba Qujie (2013) distinguishes three key style systems: U-Tsang dance, which is distinguished by elegance and religious solemnity; Kham dance, which is distinguished by strength and nomadic vigour; and Amdo dance, which is distinguished by a gentle yet energetic merging of agricultural and pastoral elements. According to Tashi Dajie (2014), Danba Guozhuang combines Kham's strength with a softness associated with the Sichuan-Western cultural milieu, whereas Changdu Guozhuang incorporates multiple ethnic elements due to its location along the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, with the "double-circle dance" being one of its most distinguishing characteristics.

2.3 Kinetic and Physiological Dimensions of Guozhuang Dance

Bi Yanjie (2016) reframes Tibetan Guozhuang dance as a sort of physical training that retains cultural expressiveness while also fulfilling fitness functions, a conceptual shift that combines sports science and dance studies together. Bi Yanjie (2016) describes Tibetan sports dance as a low-intensity, sustained aerobic exercise, with key movement cycles such as knee flexion-extension and hand circling repeated 8-12 times per minute and heart rates ranging from 100-130 beats per minute, based on an exercise physiology framework supported by Wang Ruiyuan (2018) and Tian Maijiu (2017).

Ma Xiaowei (2017) extends this analysis to a regional comparative dimension, discovering that Changdu Guozhuang produces average heart rates that are 10-15 beats per minute higher than Danba Guozhuang, owing to the Changdu style's greater movement intensity and higher tremor frequency. This physiological distinction emphasises the artistic differences between the two geographical versions. Bi Yanjie (2016) further emphasises the unique health advantages of the "knee tremor" movement for plateau inhabitants, citing its involvement in improving lower limb blood circulation and reducing the venous return issues associated with extended sedentary behaviour at high altitude. Chen Peijie (2020) gives experimental support for this assertion, revealing substantially greater venous return efficiency among Tibetan inhabitants who frequently perform the Guozhuang dance.

From a sociological standpoint, Bi Yanjie (2016) emphasises that Guozhuang dance creates a form of "collective participation in fitness" that is fundamentally different from the competitive individual logic of current sports. Li Xiansheng (2013) gives theoretical support for this result by pointing out that traditional ethnic sports in China are often structured on group interaction rather than individual rivalry. Zhang Li (2019) adds that women participate more actively and place a larger focus on the synergistic aspects of group movement. Bi Yanjie (2016) also found that communities with frequent Guozhuang participation have 40% higher rates of interpersonal interaction and significantly stronger community cohesion, linking the kinetic properties of dance to broader processes of social bonding and cultural identity formation.

2.4 Aesthetic Dimensions of Tibetan Dance

Gesang Namgyal (2015) develops a three-part aesthetic framework for Tibetan dance based on "physical order," "spiritual reflection," and "metaphorical meaning" – a system that positions bodily expression as both formal, emotional, and symbolic. This framework builds on and broadens the foundational perspectives of Chinese aesthetics scholarship, such as Zhu Guangqian's (2009) analysis of ordered beauty, Zong Baihua's (2015) concept of harmonious beauty in Chinese artistic tradition, Li Zehou's (2016) historical account of the sacred dimensions of traditional Chinese aesthetics, and Ye Lang's (2019) systematic treatment of Chinese aesthetic history.

Gesang Namgyal (2015) recognises the "dialectical unity of regularity and dynamism" as the basic formal basis of Tibetan dance. Movements follow fixed pathways — the knee's regular rhythm, the prescribed arcs of sleeve movements, the circular formations of Guozhuang — but these regularities are animated by subtle individual variation, producing what Zong Baihua (2015) refers to as "harmonious beauty" in Chinese artistic expression. Gesang Namgyal (2015) attributes this aesthetic approach to the practical limits of plateau living, specifically the movement logic dictated by the enormous Tibetan robe. Yuan He (2016) broadens the investigation to gender, observing that women's Guozhuang performances in both Danba and Changdu exhibit more nuance and agility in hand motions than male performances.

In the spiritual dimension, Gesang Namgyal (2015) contends that the "divinity" of Tibetan dance comprises numerous registers of emotional connection — between people and communities, humans

and nature, and performers and the holy. Yu Ping (2018) places this emotional resonance within the larger aesthetics of Chinese dance, recognising it as a key source of Tibetan performance's infectiousness. Zhang Li (2019) observes that women in Guozhuang performance are particularly skilled at conveying "gentle" emotional registers — a tendency that manifests differently in the two focal regions: Danba women's emotional expression in prayer gestures is delicacy, whereas Changdu women's performance combines boldness and gentleness.

At the symbolic level, Gesang Namgyal (2015) shows that Tibetan dancing motions are a system of cultural metaphors in which bodily activity contains cosmological, ethical, and historical meaning. Sleeve-raising indicates the blue sky; circular walking reflects the Buddhist circle of existence; and drumming denotes the expulsion of evil forces. According to Zhou Yuhua (2021), the "double-circle dance" in Guozhuang embodies the cosmological concept of yin-yang unification, whilst the "petal-shaped" forms unique to Danba Guozhuang represent ethnic togetherness in a multi-ethnic context. Yuan He (2016) adds that in women's Guozhuang dance, the "wrist circling" motion conveys the symbolic weight of petitions for blessing and health.

2.5 Previous Studies on Danba and Changdu Guozhuang Dance

2.5.1 Domestic Studies on Danba Guozhuang

Systematic recording of Danba Guozhuang dance began with Li Xuemei's (2012) extensive field research in Ganzi Prefecture, which is still the most authoritative single presentation of the genre. According to Li Xuemei (2012), Danba Guozhuang is located in the Dadu River Basin's multi-ethnic transitional zone, where Tibetan, Qiang, and Han cultural traditions have intersected for centuries, resulting in a dance form that preserves core Tibetan elements while incorporating neighbouring influences such as Qiang circular formation logic and Han agricultural narrative techniques. The Ganzi Prefecture Cultural Center (2015) supplemented this ethnographic research with systematic documenting of movement diagrams and lyrics, so giving empirical data for morphological analysis. Aba Normal University (2018) enlarged the regional frame by conducting a thorough examination of Tibetan folk dances in western Sichuan, whereas Yang Jiaming (2016) investigated the cultural link between Danba Guozhuang and the historical chieftainship traditions that affected its growth.

Danba Guozhuang's stylistic features include a quality that has been defined as "integrating strength and suppleness, with delicate movements, softness, and agility" (Li Xuemei, 2012). This stylistic feature is best expressed by female performers, who Zhang Li (2019) describes as the principal representatives of the Danba regional style. Knee movements have moderate flexion-extension tremors at around 10 times per minute, which are gentler in frequency and intensity than the male norm, while hand movements are refined and deliberate, centred on the "Danba wrist rotation" technique, which involves alternating palm orientations that mimic ritual gestures such as "presenting khata scarves" and "sowing blessings" (Li Xuemei, 2012; Ma Ning, 2020). The circular structure typical of Guozhuang dance has evolved in Danba into more intricate "petal" and "knot" forms that divide and reconverge according to musical rhythm, symbolising ethnic tolerance and societal peace (Li Xuemei, 2012; Ganzi Prefecture Cultural Center, 2015).

The musical accompaniment of Danba Guozhuang, constructed around the stringed Xianhu and supplemented by flutes and sheepskin drums, offers an aural texture perfectly suited to the dance's "gentle swaying and slow movements" (Li Xuemei, 2012). Sichuan Normal University (2017) used

acoustic research to show that instrumental frequencies and movement patterns were highly synchronized. The lyrical repertoire is divided into three thematic categories: festival celebrations, labour narratives, and emotional expressions, and it includes a significant amount of Jiarong Tibetan dialect vocabulary, making it an important resource for regional linguistic research (Li Xuemei, 2012; Yang Jiaming, 2016).

Danba Guozhuang is a social practice that permeates all aspects of community life, from New Year celebrations and wedding ceremonies to harvest festivals, with women consistently taking on leadership roles as 'lead dancers' in charge of transmitting movement vocabulary and lyrical knowledge (Li Xuemei, 2012; Ma Ning, 2020; Zhang Li, 2019). Guozhuang dance also serves as a means of cross-cultural integration in communities with mixed Han and Qiang populations, with involvement across ethnic lines building regional cooperation (Aba Normal University, 2018; Zhou Yuhua, 2021).

2.5.2 Domestic Studies on Changdu Guozhuang

Zhang Li (2020) gives the most comprehensive analysis of Changdu Guozhuang, drawing on field surveys conducted in 12 villages in eastern Changdu to describe the dance's artistic features and inheritance processes in connection to intangible cultural asset legislation. Sun (2018) and the Changdu Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center (2018) provide authoritative archival materials on the tradition's genealogy, transmission lineages, movement norms, and folk performance contexts, while the Tibet Autonomous Region Federation of Literary and Art Circles (2019) contextualises Changdu's unique character within the larger landscape of Tibetan dance.

Changdu Guozhuang's cultural underpinnings are inextricably linked to the region's historical location as the Eastern Tibetan entrance of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, an economic and cultural crossroads for Tibetan, Han, Naxi, and Yi populations (Zhang Li, 2020; Chen Bo, 2020). This multicultural environment resulted in a dance form that incorporates diverse ethnic movement vocabularies — rhythmic patterns from Naxi singing traditions, kicking techniques from Han folk dances — into a core Tibetan circle dance framework, resulting in a style described as "robust yet agile" (Nima Tsering, 2017; Zhang Li, 2020). The presence of Gelugpa and Nyingma Buddhist schools in the region has influenced the dance's ritual features, with movements like "clapping and shaking hands" and "raising hands to heaven" representing religious conventions (Zhang Li, 2020; Zhou Yuhua, 2021).

Changdu Guozhuang is distinguished by high-frequency flexion-extension tremors that occur 12 to 15 times per minute, combined with a "turning and stomping" gait that produces a weighted, grounded rhythmic quality associated with eastern Tibet's horseback riding and cattle-herding traditions (Zhang Li, 2020). Ma Xiaowei (2019) uses motion analysis to show that female Changdu Guozhuang performers maintain a knee vibration frequency of about 12 times per minute, which is lower than the male norm of 15 times per minute, and exhibit correspondingly greater gentleness, resulting in a style that balances the regional characteristic of strength with distinctively feminine suppleness (Zhang Li).

2.5.3 International Studies

According to a survey of international scholarship, foreign academic interest in Tibetan dance has primarily focused on broad cultural anthropology frameworks and specific functional domains such as physical education and oral history, with insufficient attention paid to the regional diversity of Guozhuang forms (Zhang Li, 2020). This study revealed no published foreign-language books or articles expressly discussing the Guozhuang dance of Danba or Changdu. Historically, international Tibetan studies have focused on religious and linguistic fields, treating dance as a peripheral cultural

phenomenon rather than a primary subject of inquiry — a trend that has left the regional and gender-specific dimensions of Guozhuang largely unexplored in the global academic literature.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach based on ethnochoreological principles, viewing dance as an embodied cultural activity inextricably linked to its social, historical, and ecological setting (Buckland, 1999; Sklar, 2000). A comparative case study format presents the Guozhuang traditions of Danba and Changdu as two analytically separate but historically connected examples, allowing for in-depth regional assessment and systematic cross-regional comparison (Yin, 2018). This methodology is well-suited to the study's combined focus on historical evolution and morphological comparison because it allows formal movement analysis to be grounded in larger cultural variables rather than handled in isolation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Research Scope

The study focuses on two interconnected topics: (1) the historical development and performance contexts of Guozhuang dance among women in Danba and Changdu, and (2) a comparative analysis of female dance forms from both regions, paying special attention to movement vocabulary, ritual function, and transmission practice. Together, these themes form a cohesive investigation of the link between cultural context and physical expression in Tibetan dance.

3.3 Research Period and Field Sites

Data collection began in July 2025 and was carried out at two principal field sites: Danba County, Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, and Changdu, Tibet Autonomous Region. These places were chosen as the primary geographical centers of the Jiarong and Changdu branches of Guozhuang, respectively, and are widely recognised in existing scholarship as emblematic of each regional tradition (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2020). Fieldwork locations included local communities, cultural associations, intangible cultural heritage training institutions, and public performance places where Guozhuang is frequently practiced and transmitted.

3.4 Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to choose participants who had direct knowledge of the study issues (Patton, 2015). Three groups were formed.

The Expert Panel was made up of three experts with proven competence in Tibetan dance research, ethnic folk performance, and intangible cultural heritage who were linked with top Chinese institutions. Their mission was to give theoretical foundation and contextual interpretation for the historical and cultural characteristics of each regional tradition.

The Practitioner Group was made up of three active Guozhuang custodians: a well-known folk inheritor and choreographer, as well as two senior performers from renowned Guozhuang groups. As essential cultural advisors with profound embodied knowledge of movement language and transmission practice (Spradley, 1979), this group was the major source of insider information.

The General Audience Group consisted of 18 community members recruited from both field locations, spanning a wide range of ages, jobs, and levels of involvement with the dance tradition. Their inclusion allowed the research to capture how Guozhuang is received and socially formed within its community context, which is compatible with the belief that intangible cultural heritage is preserved via the interpretative interaction of both spectators and performers (UNESCO, 2003; Howard, 2016).

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected using four integrated methodologies, allowing for methodological triangulation and assuring both breadth and depth of coverage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Literature review of domestic and international scholarship on Tibetan dance, Guozhuang, Jiarong and Changdu cultural traditions, and heritage policy established the theoretical and historical foundations of the study. Sources were drawn from CNKI, Scopus, Google Scholar, local chronicles, and archival cultural documentation.

Participatory observation was carried out at festivals, village ceremonies, wedding rites and regular Guozhuang practice sessions in both locations. The researchers engaged in activities alongside community members, using field diaries and standardised observation forms to record time, location, participants, dance genre, costume, and lyrical themes (Spradley, 1980). Direct engagement allowed for the embodied experience of movement aspects that were previously unattainable through external observation alone (Sklar 2000).

Semi-structured interviews were done with all three participant groups, with personalised interview guidelines designed for each group's unique connection to the practice. The semi-structured style enabled methodical treatment of fundamental issues while allowing for the flexibility needed to follow emerging areas (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews were performed with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Movement documentation was done with tripod-mounted digital cameras capable of high-resolution slow-motion capture. Documentation focused on female performers in both areas, with an emphasis on movement features described in the literature as regionally diagnostic: wrist rotation, knee flexion-extension rhythm, sleeve dynamics, footwork, and formation structure (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Zhang, 2019).

3.6 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach, which included initial data familiarisation, systematic coding, theme development, review, and refinement, and the production of an integrated analytical narrative. The analysis was carried out inductively, enabling themes to arise from the data while being guided by the conceptual frameworks described in the literature study.

Video recordings were subjected to rigorous movement analysis using repeated slow-motion comparison, allowing for the documenting of variations in movement quality, spatial range, temporal rhythm, and body usage between the two traditions, as well as between male and female performers. Field journal notes and observational logs provided additional data to contextualise trends discovered in interviews and video footage.

The findings are presented using an integrated multi-format approach. Swing diagrams, movement breakdown charts, and dynamic comparison graphics show regional variations in wrist amplitude, knee tremor frequency, and sleeve range. Mind maps demonstrate the relationships between the geographical environment, religious beliefs, and dance forms. Comparative tables provide a systematic examination of similarities and variations in symbolic elements, movement patterns, and cultural functions. Selected video samples are used when written descriptions are insufficient to communicate the embodied nature of movement (Sklar, 2000).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Historical Origins and Cultural Background

4.1.1 Danba Guozhuang

The emergence of Danba women's Guozhuang is the result of four interconnected conditions: alpine canyon geography, Jiarong agricultural production, matrilineal cultural legacy, and nature worship belief systems. Danba, located in the eastern Hengduan Mountains, where the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau meets the Sichuan Basin, has fashioned a subsistence model based on intense mountain farming (Figure 7). As primary agricultural labourers, women's daily movements — bending to plant seeds, swinging arms during harvesting, rhythmic threshing — were refined and aesthetically elevated into the movement vocabulary of Guozhuang dance, resulting in a "agricultural cultural bodily narrative" (Li Xuemei, 2012).



Figure 7 Landform characteristics of Danba

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_appli\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_appli(2026))

The region has extensive matrilineal cultural relics, known by researchers as the "Eastern Kingdom of Women" heritage (Li Shaoming, 2014), which gave women a historically key position in communal rituals (Figure 8). This social status translates readily into Guozhuang practice, where women serve as key performers, rhythm controllers, and cultural stewards.



Figure 1 Scenes of female labor in Danba

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_appli\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_appli(2026))

By the Song and Yuan eras, the communal living patterns of the "Thousand Watchtower Kingdom" had established the circle dance as a medium for community cohesiveness and identity maintenance, corresponding with Wu Xiaobang's (2008) description of Tibetan dance's "collective symbiosis." At the religious level, Guozhuang is deeply embedded in sacred mountain worship and agricultural festival cycles: the "Praying for Abundance Guozhuang" before spring ploughing and the "Celebrating Abundance Guozhuang" after autumn harvest are both female-led rituals that serve as channels for expressing reverence for nature and hopes for future harvests, as illustrated in performance documentation (Figure 9).



Figure 9 Performance Scene

Source: [https://chat.baidu.com/search?word&extParamsJsotpi\(2026\)](https://chat.baidu.com/search?word&extParamsJsotpi(2026))

4.1.2 Changdu Guozhuang

The creation of Changdu Guozhuang represents a fundamentally diverse set of cultural factors centred on geographical openness, nomadic-commercial living, and intercultural interchange. Changdu, located in the heart of the Three Parallel Rivers region (Figure 15), played an important role along the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, which connected Tibetan, Han Chinese, and South Asian cultural networks (Figure 16), establishing it as a center of Han-Tibetan integration and multicultural exchange

(Liu Zhong, 2016). The ensuing socioeconomic base, which included pastoralism, agriculture, and trade, gave rise to a dance vocabulary that reflected caravan movement and nomadic bravery, as well as Tibetan rhythmic roots.



Figure 15 Urban topography of Changdu

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_applid\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_applid(2026))



Figure 2 Ancient Tea-Horse Road

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b \(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b (2026))

Since the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the institutionalisation of tea-horse trade has expanded Guozhuang's social events from tribal ritual to welcoming ceremonies, trade celebrations, and horse racing festivals (Figure 17), gradually diversifying the tradition's artistic forms and enhancing its performative, competitive, and narrative dimensions (Zhang Li, 2020). The confluence of Gelugpa and Nyingma Buddhist schools reinforced religious ritual features in Changdu Guozhuang, resulting in a threefold cultural identity of "nomadic + trade + belief" (Chen Bo, 2020; Nima Tsering, 2017).



Figure 3 Pastureland in the Changdu pastoral area

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_a \(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_a (2026))

4.1.3 Comparative Summary of Historical Backgrounds

The fundamental divergence between the two traditions can be characterized as follows: Danba Guozhuang emerged from "highland valley agrarian civilization" and "female-dominated social structure," with cultural logic centered on agricultural cycles, female authority, and nature worship. Changdu Guozhuang resulted from "nomadic-trading composite civilization" and "multi-ethnic integration," shaped by caravan narratives, cultural openness, and cross-ethnic exchange. Together, these trajectories exemplify the "diversity within unity" structure of Tibetan culture (Ma Rong, 2018) and confirm Luo Xiongyan's (2011) proposition that geographical environment directly determines dance style.

4.2 Dance Movement Characteristics

4.2.1 Danba Female Guozhuang

Danba Guozhuang's general movement style may be described as "graceful, steady, and delicate," with roots in the physical memory of rigorous mountain agriculture (Li Xuemei 2012).

Hand movements. The signature "wrist-encircling spike-raising" gesture (Figures 29) employs the wrist as the axis to drive a delicate inward or outward circular rotation before rising in an arc trajectory with the palm facing upward, simulating the combined action of wrist rotation during harvesting and gathering cut barley heads. Movement trajectories are centred in the anterior trunk and below shoulder height, with force coming from the wrist pushing the forearm up. The movement is often finished in four or eight beats, synchronised with a prolonged vocal melody.

Action description: With the wrist as the axis, rotate the wrist naturally in a clockwise direction, with the fingers moving in coordination until the palm returns to a position with the palm facing upward.

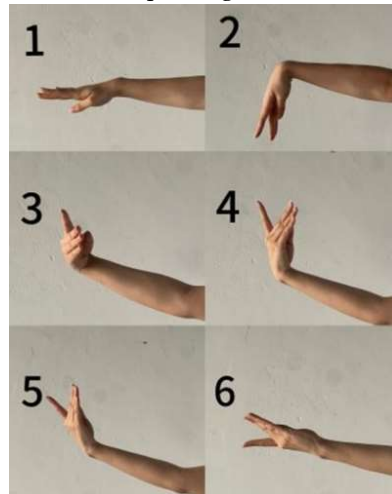


Figure 29 Hand movements

Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

Primary footwork. The "ground-touching spiral body twist" (Figures 32) combines lower-body ground contact and controlled rotation. One foot extends forward or backward, with the toe gently contacting the ground, and the center of gravity easily shifts; the upper body rotates horizontally in tiny amplitudes around the lumbar spine — commonly 90 to 180 degrees — with eyes following the motion. The core generates the majority of the rotational force, which mimics directional shifts within tiny terraced fields.

Action description: The dominant leg stands upright and stable, while the driving leg lightly touches the ground with the sole, maintaining the center of gravity on the dominant leg to complete the foot placement and foot lifting movements.



Figure 4 Limb movements

Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

Foundation rhythm. The "knee flexion-extension tremor" (Figures 35) is the fundamental kinetic pattern underlying all Danba Guozhuang action. Continuous small-amplitude flexion-extension of the knee joints is performed with legs together and toes naturally apart, resulting in lateral hip swings and slight upper-body undulation. The frequency ranges from 8 to 10 cycles per minute (Duoji Ouzhu, 2017), with

vertical movement perpendicular to the ground and no substantial horizontal displacement. This rhythm is derived from the natural cushioning motion generated from extended mountain hiking and agricultural labour at high altitude.

Action description: Initial posture for flexion-extension movement, maintaining an upright body position with a straight and upright posture throughout, and naturally spreading the toes outward.



Figure 5 Foot movement

Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

4.2.2 Changdu Female Guozhuang

Changdu Guozhuang's movement style is characterised by "vigorous, unrestrained, and powerful" expressiveness, drawing on nomadic and caravan traditions (Zhang Li, 2020).

Hand movement. The "wide sleeve swing" (Figures 37) uses energy from the shoulder joint to strongly swing the long sleeve or arm upward at about 45 degrees or horizontally. The sleeve fully stretches in the air, following an expansive arc with amplitudes that regularly approach 120 degrees, before quickly retracting for the next swing. The dance is performed at musical accents with explosive strength, directly simulating the motion of swinging reins or a horsewhip during high-speed horse riding (Zhang Li, 2020).

Action description: Swing the arm with the shoulder as the axis, where the upper arm drives the forearm, and the forearm drives the wrist and fingertips, resulting in a rapid outward swing of the entire arm.



Figure 37 Hand movements

Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

Primary footwork. The "cross-saddle leg rotation step" (Figures 39) uses knee flexion-extension tremors as a basis. The driving leg bends and raises upward — female performers use a point-to-ground variant — while the dominant leg spins clockwise or anticlockwise around the foot as an axis, covering about 180 to 360 degrees before landing and moving onwards. The action imitates mounting and dismounting horses while overcoming obstacles on the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, translating the sequence "leg lifting — saddle bridging — body stabilisation" into dance terminology (Liu Zhong, 2016).

Instructions: Assume a preparatory stance with the forefoot touching the ground. Adjust the body's center of gravity before performing the rotation.



Figure 6 Limb movements
Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

Foundation rhythm. The "treading step" (Figures 43) places one foot firmly on the ground, making a distinct "tap" sound as the knee cushions through flexion-extension; the second foot quickly follows, resting on the inner forefoot in a "step" action with friction sound. A distinct "strong-weak" rhythmic pattern gives a feeling of directed development, evoking both the rhythmic foot motions of horseback riding with stirrups and the weighted gait of caravan teams trudging over rocky old pathways (Zhang Li, 2020). Female performers have a knee vibration frequency of around 12 cycles per minute, which is lower than the male standard of 15 (Ma Xiaowei, 2019), indicating a movement quality that blends the regional feature of power with feminine softness.

Instructions: Stand on the ground with the leading foot pointing forward and the entire sole of the foot on the ground, shifting the body's center of gravity forward.



Figure 7 Foot movement
Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

4.3 Musical Characteristics

4.3.1 Danba Guozhuang Music

Danba Guozhuang music follows the notion of "melody as backbone, lyrics as soul, and instruments as rhythm," and functions as a "melody-driven narrative poem" (Figure 45). Melodically, compositions mostly use the pentatonic Gong mode, with fluid, stepwise progressions mimicking meandering mountain streams and arranged in single-movement repeats of 8 or 16 measures. The typical composition "Spring Ploughing Prayer Song" (Figure 46) demonstrates these characteristics: a pure pentatonic structure with flowing melodic lines, each phrase in sync with language rhythm, vibrato flourishes at phrase ends, and stringed hu sliding movements.



Figure 8 DANBA GUOZHANG

Source: [https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid\(2026\)=](https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid(2026)=)

Lyricaly, compositions are composed in the Danba Jiarong Tibetan dialect and organised around four major themes — agricultural productivity, nature worship, celebratory ritual, and village friendship — using a "prologue-development-closure" narrative framework. The wooden-bodied stringed hu (BiWang, Figure 47) leads the melody with soft, mellow tones; the six-stringed zither (ZhaMuNei, Figures 48) provides harmonic support with bright, crisp plucking; and the Tibetan vertical flute (XiongLin) adds decorative embellishments that mimic natural sounds. Vocal performance employs a "lead singer-chorus" binary structure (Figure 50), with an elder community lady providing sustained starting notes that correspond to the primary tune.

Image caption: A traditional Tibetan musical instrument known as 'Bi Wang', primarily constructed from wutong wood or birch wood. The instrument's body is covered with cowhide, while its strings and bow bristles are made of horsehair, resulting in a rich and resonant tone.



Figure 47 BiWang

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpic\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpic(2026))



Image caption: This six-stringed instrument, known as ZhaMuNei in Tibetan, is a traditional Tibetan musical instrument. It is called a six-stringed zither due to its six strings.

Figure 9 ZhaMuNei

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_(2026))

4.3.2 Changdu Guozhuang Music

GUOZHUANG: DANCE CHARACTERISTICS
OF TIBETAN WOMEN IN THE DANBA AREA,
CHANGDU, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Changdu Guozhuang music is described as a "rhythm-driven symphonic tableau" with emotional intensity and stunning rhythmic contrast (Figure 51). Melodically, compositions use Yu and Shang modes with wide vocal ranges, featuring frequent large interval leaps — fourths, fifths, and octaves — alongside syncopated and dotted rhythms following a dramatic progression from "gentle opening through intense mid-section to celebratory finale" (Nima Tsering, 2017). The representative piece "Tea Horse Ancient Road Welcome Tune" exemplifies these characteristics: a nine-degree vocal range, long opening notes evoking returning caravans, an abruptly ascending middle section resembling approaching hoofbeats, and a dense rhythmic finale evoking welcome celebrations.

D 宫调 4/4 拍 速度 $f = 88$ (中板→ $f = 104$, 快板, 马帮迎宾专用)

【核心 8 小节 (对应图 26 节奏型)】

1. $\dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} | \dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} - |$ (切分音) $\dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} | \dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} \dot{1} |$
宫 角 徵 角 宫 角 商 宫 - 宫 角 宫 角 商 宫 角 商 角 徵 角
(歌词: 马帮踏歌 | 过险滩哈 | 达相迎情 | 意暖暖 - |)

2. $\dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} \dot{1} |$ (附点) $\dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} | \dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} \dot{1} - | \dot{1} \dot{2} \dot{3} \dot{4} \dot{5} \dot{1} \nabla \dot{1} |$
角 商 宫 角 宫 角 宫 角 宫 角 角 商 徵 角 宫 角 角 商 - 宫 角 宫 角 宫 角
(歌词: 弦子叮咚传 | 喜讯昌都儿 | 女笑开颜同 | 歌舞暖 - |)

Figure 10 Musical score of "Cha Ma Gu Dao Ying Ke Diao"

Source: [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/\(2026\)](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/(2026))

Lyrically, songs are based on caravan narratives, nomadic life, and religious prayer written in Kham Tibetan, blending documentary veracity with tremendous emotional impact. Instrumentally, the ox-horn stringed hu (BiWang, Figure 52) provides a desolate yet rugged melodic foundation with dynamic tempo adaptation; copper chimes (Figure 53) worn at the waist or held in both hands produce crisp rhythmic tones that unify ensemble movement; and the bronze qin (Figures 54) contributes deep sustained tones during climactic passages, amplifying ceremonial grandeur. Vocal performance employs an alternating "lead singing and chorus" framework, with forceful, resonant voices and synchronised rhythmic chorus replies.

Image caption: Influenced by nomadic culture, traditional musical instruments in the Changdu region are characterized by practicality and durability. The resonator boxes are predominantly constructed from thick birch wood, resulting in a compact and robust instrument design that facilitates portability and is suitable for performance in high-altitude environments (Changdu Municipal People's Government, 2017).



Figure 11 BiWang

Source: [https://www.doubao.com/chat/3841182487753\(2026\)](https://www.doubao.com/chat/3841182487753(2026))



Figure 12 Copperchime

Source: <https://chat.baidu.com/search?word=&extParamsJson=>



Figure 13 TongQin

Source: [https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_appli\(2026\)](https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?adpicid=0&b_appli(2026))

4.4 Costume Characteristics

4.4.1 Danba Costume System

Danba women's Guozhuang clothes exhibit an agricultural aesthetic of "practical adaptability and restrained elegance," organised into three contexts: daily wear, celebratory clothing, and stage costume (Li Xuemei, 2012; Ganzi Prefecture Cultural Centre, 2015).

Daily wear is dominated by deep blue, dark grey, and jet-black tones, which are appropriate for agricultural labour, with little embellishment: basic azalea and antler embroidered patterns on cuffs and collars. Festive clothing preserves dark base tones while adding colourful accents of red, pink, yellow, and light blue to collars, vest edges, and pleated skirt hems, with embroidery extending to incorporate rice stalks, auspicious knots, and holy mountain motifs (Figures 58-62, 67-70).

The characteristic clothing is a 12-layer pleated skirt made of thick black wool, which unfolds like an umbrella when rotated, establishing visual synchronisation between costume and agricultural labour actions (Figure 58). Headwear ranges from utilitarian embroidered headscarves with silver hairpins in everyday situations to silk scarves with agate-inlaid silver embellishments during festivals (Figure 76), with males donning golden felt hats on formal occasions (Figure 75). Stage costumes add 12-15 skirt layers and improve colour intensity while retaining traditional themes, with lightweight alloy materials substituting heavy silver accessories to suit expanded dance moves.



Figure 58 DANBA Women's Pleated Skirt

Source: Ganzi Prefecture Museum (2026)



Figure 14 DANBA Men's Hat

Source: [https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid\(2026\)](https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid(2026))



Figure 15 DANBA female headdress

Source: [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/\(2026\)](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/(2026))

4.4.2 Changdu Costume System

Changdu women's Guozhuang costumes represent the nomadic-commercial aesthetics of "bold display and wealth symbolism," expressing the principle of "weightiness, grandeur, abundance, and vibrancy" (Liu Zhong, 2016; Nima Tsering, 2017).

Warm tones of scarlet, sapphire blue, and dark green are used in everyday wear, with moderate saturation and delicate golden accents (Figures 79), making it suitable for nomadic labour and travel. Festive attire features vibrant clashes of crimson, sapphire blue, dark green, and gold with wide imitation tiger, leopard, or otter fur trimmings 10-15 cm wide at collars, lapels, and hems; women's intricate braids adorned with dozens of amber, coral, and agate jewels complement large silver Gawu Buddha boxes. Horse images, historic route designs, and the Eight Treasures religious emblems are embroidered in gold and silver thread (Figure 85-86). Men's festive costume includes "Hero Knot" headdress (crimson and black silk tassels coiled atop the head), gold-topped ceremonial caps, and jewel-encrusted Tibetan knives. Stage costumes keep the broad silhouette and brilliant colour palette while replacing heavy fur with lightweight synthetic silk and lowering trim width to 5-8 cm. Silver bells are fastened to waistbands to minimise interference with movement.



Figure 16 CHANGDU Women's Clothing

Source: [https://www.xiaohongshu.com/\(2026\)](https://www.xiaohongshu.com/(2026))

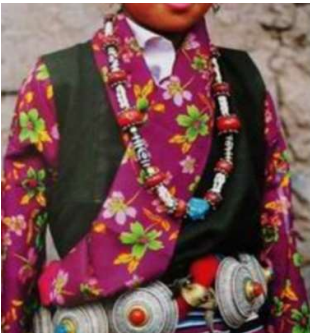


Figure 17 CHANGDU Women's Clothing
Source: [https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&c9\(2026\)](https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&c9(2026))



Figure 18 CHANGDU Men's Clothing
Source: [https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid\(2026\)](https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid(2026))

4.5 Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences

4.5.1 Shared Characteristics

Both traditions share three basic characteristics. First, both are founded in Tibetan traditional culture, with participants of all ages and genders performing in circle forms to serve key social tasks such as community cohesiveness and ethnic identification (Ma Rong, 2018). Second, both adhere to the tripartite synthesis of "singing, dancing, and music," with vocal performance serving as the foundation, instrumental accompaniment giving rhythmic support, and dance motions precisely synchronised with musical patterns. Third, both share the universal rhythmic foundation of "knee flexion and tremor" — the defining hallmark of Tibetan dance rooted in physiological adaptation to high-altitude environments — and the morphological principle that "movement begins with flexion, flexion carries tremor, and tremor contains extension" (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Huamaocuo, 2012). Both have been inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List and are transmitted through oral instruction and hands-on demonstration.

4.5.2 Regional Differences

Table 1 summarise the systematic variations between the two traditions across five dimensions, which are detailed below.

Table 1 Comparison of Core Characteristics Between DANBA and GUOZHUANG in Changdu Region

Dimensional contrast	DANBA area	Changdu area
Origin Core Imagery	High Mountain Valley Agricultural Civilization (Sowing and Harvesting)	The Ancient Tea-Horse Road + Nomadic Culture (Horseback Riding, Trekking)
Performance Style	Introverted, steady, and delicate with a gentle rhythm	Exuberant, expansive, and powerful with strong rhythmic contrast
Performance structure	Fixed tempo (slow tempo-moderate tempo-fast tempo), unified for the group	Flexibility (lead-in-group dance-skill demonstration-celebration), improvisational interaction

Dimensional contrast	DANBA area	Changdu area
Sex Roles Online Edition	Women dominate overwhelmingly with limited male participation	Mixed-gender co-dancing with males predominantly demonstrating technical skills
Aesthetic orientation	Subtle, Harmonious, and Practical (Agricultural Aesthetics)	Elegant, flamboyant, and demonstrative (Nomadic-Commercial Aesthetics)
Core Musical Instruments	Chinese fiddle (wooden), six-stringed zither, Tibetan vertical flute	Xianghu (ox horn), stringed bells, copper qin

Source:Zihan Tang (2026)

4.6 Contemporary Development

4.6.1 Shared Transformations

Both traditions have undergone simultaneous modifications in the context of globalisation, modernisation, and institutionalisation of intangible cultural resources. Functionally, both have evolved from ceremonial bearers to cultural tourist resources, instructional material, and identification markers. Performance venues have expanded geographically, from village squares and threshing fields to professional stages, tourist attractions, and new media platforms. Both have moved from merely oral transmission to institutionalised intangible cultural asset preservation that includes inheritor certification, digital documentation, and rigorous classroom education. Both have also participated in stage creative production, which includes standardised movement training, sophisticated spatial formation design, symphonic music arrangement, and lightweight wardrobe adaption (Figures 105).



Figure 19 Performance venue of DANBA's stage production "Legacy"

Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

4.6.2 Divergent Development Trajectories

Despite these common alterations, the two traditions have taken divergent current growth routes, reflecting their underlying cultural logics (Table 2).

Table 2 Summary of Similarities and Differences in Contemporary GUOZHUANG Dance Development Between Two Regions

Dimensional contrast	GUOZHUANG, DANBA REGION	GUOZHUANG, CHANGDU AREA
same point	1. Incorporated into national/provincial intangible cultural heritage protection frameworks, receiving institutional safeguards and relying on the education system for transmission; 2. Expand into tourism performances, festival stages, and new media platforms to achieve spatial transformation from local rituals to public performances; 3. Explore integration with stage arts, visual technologies, and interdisciplinary forms to facilitate the modern transformation of traditional practices;	

	4. As a cultural symbol of Tibetan identity, it serves the functions of facilitating cultural exchange and constructing cultural identity both domestically and internationally.	
Innovation Level and Orientation	Adhering to the original style and ritual connotations, innovation focuses on stage design and communication aspects, belonging to the "preserving essence while making minor adjustments in extension" type.	Leveraging its inherent performance tension, the production enhances movement techniques and structural dramatization adaptations, presenting an "outward expansion and performance enhancement-oriented" approach.
Communication Influence and Audience Interaction	Emphasizing in-depth cultural interpretation and aesthetic contemplation, the target audience comprises individuals with profound interest in agrarian civilization and local traditions.	With prominent rhythm and visual expressiveness, it possesses "hit potential" in new media dissemination and is prone to triggering imitation and participatory interactions.

Source: Zihan Tang (2026)

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study looked at women's Guozhuang dance in Danba, Garzê Prefecture, Sichuan Province, and Changdu, Tibet Autonomous Region, using qualitative fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, a literature review, and systematic video analysis. The findings show a developmental trajectory of "homologous divergence" — both traditions have roots in Tibetan folk circle dance culture and the Tubo-period music-dance system, but have evolved into structurally distinct regional branches: the Jiarong agricultural branch in Danba and the Kham nomadic-commercial branch in Changdu. This divergence represents Luo Xiongyan's (2011) direct link between spatial ecology, production mode, and embodied cultural expression, as well as an extension of it via a gendered analytical lens that prior study has mostly ignored.

On historical and cultural background, both traditions can be traced back to the Neolithic Karuo Culture and the Tubo Kingdom period, when the spread of Tibetan cultural and religious systems across Kham laid the groundwork for circle dance practice, with women playing central roles in folk ritual transmission (Wang Yao, 2003; Shi Shuo, 2019). Regional divergence resulted from fundamentally distinct ecological and social settings. Danba's enclosed highland valley geography shaped a subsistence model of intensive mountain agriculture in which women played primary productive roles, which was reinforced by significant matrilineal cultural remnants known as the "Eastern Kingdom of Women" legacy (Li Shaoming, 2014), as well as a belief system that combined Gelugpa Buddhism and sacred mountain worship. Together, these conditions created a cultural logic based on agricultural cycles, female authority, and nature worship, which pervades Danba Guozhuang's ceremonial function, movement vocabulary, and transmission structure (Li, 2012; Ma, 2018). Changdu's position as a key point on the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, which connected Tibetan, Han, and South Asian cultural networks, resulted in a socioeconomic foundation that included pastoralism, agriculture, and trade (Liu Zhong, 2016; Chen 2020). The resulting cultural openness, multicultural exchange, and caravan mobility created a "Nomadic + Trade + Belief" cultural identity in which Guozhuang absorbed diverse ethnic movement elements while preserving Tibetan rhythmic foundations, confirming Ma Rong's (2018) description of Tibetan cultural formation as a process of "diverse harmony." The disparity between these two trajectories reveals Tibetan culture's "diversity within unity" structure (Ma Rong, 2018), while also validating Ren Naiqiang's (2003) remark that cultures in different sections of Kham are both co-evolved and separate.

On artistic forms and performance characteristics, both traditions are organised around the shared morphological core of "knee flexion and tremor" — the defining rhythmic identity of Tibetan dance rooted in physiological adaptation to high-altitude environments — and the dynamic coordination principle of "movement begins with flexion, flexion carries tremor, and tremor contains extension" (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Huamaocuo, 2012). Both traditions also share the performance characteristics of collectivity, ritualism, and life orientation that Wu Xiaobang (2008) identifies as fundamental to Tibetan folk dance, as well as the "harmony of music, dance, and lyrics" in which movement and musical structure are tightly synchronised with local Tibetan dialect lyrical content. Within this same framework, the two regional traditions generate systematic distinctions in all creative areas. Danba female Guozhuang has "internally condensed" movement quality, with wrist-driven upper body gestures confined to below shoulder height, sustained flexion-extension tremors at 8-10 cycles per minute (Duoji Ouzhu, 2017), and torso rotations not exceeding 180 degrees, resulting in a restrained precision aesthetic that distils the endurance and delicacy of mountain agricultural labour (Li, 2012). Changdu female Guozhuang has outward-expanding centrifugal movement quality, with shoulder-driven sleeve swings exceeding 120 degrees, treading-step footwork with pronounced strong-weak rhythmic contrast, and a full 360-degree rotational range, embodying the bold, open spirit of nomadic-trading civilisation (Zhang, 2020; Tashi Dargye, 2014). These anatomical disparities are portrayed systematically through musical style, clothing symbolism, and performance mode. Danba music is "melody-driven narrative poetry" with delicate string and flute timbres, while clothes express agrarian aesthetics of restrained elegance and performances are ritualised and agriculturally grounded (Li, 2012; Tian, 2011). Changdu music is a "rhythm-driven symphonic tableau" with wide-ranging modes and syncopated rhythmic patterns, while costumes embody nomadic-commercial aesthetics of bold display and wealth symbolism, and performances are spectacular and designed for a large audience (Nima Tsering, 2017; Zhang, 2020).

On gender dynamics, this study's most significant contribution to gender dynamics is the identification of two structurally distinct modes of female participation that reflect the different cultural logics of each regional tradition — a dimension that previous scholarship has consistently underemphasised (Zhang, 2019; Henrion-Dourcy, 2004). Danba women demonstrate "hidden dominance" by collectively controlling the overall dance rhythm, initiating formation changes, and synchronising male dancers' dynamics to female movement — a dominance expressed through subtle channels rooted in matrilineal cultural genetics (Ma, 2018). Changdu women demonstrate "dominant integration": male and female movements form symmetrical question-and-answer structures of comparable intensity and spatial engagement, reflecting the dissolution of gender boundaries characteristic of the Ancient Tea-Horse Road's fluid multicultural environment (Liu Zhong, 2016). In both cases, Guozhuang serves as a physical medium for women to encode, transmit, and negotiate cultural identity, with a focus on "the wisdom and perseverance of farming women" in Danba and "the boldness and tenderness of nomadic trade women" in Changdu. In contemporary settings, the involvement of professional choreographers and the growth of staged adaptation have in some cases weakened women's narrative authority, with certain productions engaging in masculinised adaptations that erode the female-centered cultural specificity essential to authentic Guozhuang transmission — a risk identified by Zhang Li (2019) as requiring explicit scholarly and policy attention.

On contemporary inheritance, both traditions have gone through parallel transformations: functional expansion from ritual carrier to cultural tourism resource and educational content, spatial expansion from village squares to professional stages and digital platforms, and mechanistic transition from oral transmission to institutionalised intangible cultural heritage protection (Howard, 2016; UNESCO, 2003). Both face the same challenges of cultural authenticity erosion due to excessive commercialisation (Gesang Namgyal, 2015), intergenerational transmission crisis caused by youth urbanisation, resource scarcity in documentation and training, and superficial media engagement that conveys movement

form but fails to communicate cultural depth. Regional divergence in inheritance trajectory reflects the broader cultural divergence of the two traditions: Danba exhibits a pattern of "well-preserved traditions with insufficient innovation," maintaining authentic ritual forms within stable community structures while suffering from inadequate dissemination and declining youth engagement (Ma, 2018); Changdu exhibits "active innovation with weakened traditions," benefiting from institutional support and new media engagement. Both paths highlight the key conflict between preservation and creativity in current intangible cultural heritage governance, which Losang Kailu (2007) and Luo Xiongyan (2011) define as the condition of surviving ethnic dance traditions in modern China. These findings show that the difference between Danba and Changdu women's Guozhuang is more than just a stylistic variation; it is a systemic expression of two distinct cultural ecologies encoded in movement, music, costume, performance mode, gender role, and transmission practice. The study contributes to dance anthropology by enriching understanding of the body-ecology relationship in ethnic minority dance (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Sklar, 2000), intangible cultural heritage studies by providing the regionally differentiated analytical foundation necessary for targeted conservation strategy (Howard, 2016), and gender studies by demonstrating how female subjectivity is not uniformly constructed across a shared cultural tradition but regionally inflected through specific ecological, social, and historical conditions (Henrion-Dourcy, 2004; Zhang, 2019).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND FUTURE STUDIES

6.1 Recommendations

Intangible Cultural Heritage Conservation. A tiered performance classification framework is proposed, distinguishing ritual performances that strictly adhere to traditional ceremonial procedures from explanatory performances at cultural events that allow for moderate interpretation and creative performances in commercial contexts that require mandatory labelling of adapted source material (Howard, 2016; UNESCO, 2003). This promotes cultural tourism without jeopardising traditional purity. Conservation policy should also explicitly protect women's custodial authority within both traditions, as the increasing involvement of professional choreographers in staged adaptations has weakened female narrative control and resulted in masculinised interpretations that undermine the female-centered specificity required for authentic transmission (Zhang, 2019). A cross-regional collaboration mechanism connecting Danba and Changdu to related heritage regions along the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, such as Yushu in Qinghai and Diqing in Yunnan, would maintain living cultural connections between regional branches while also providing infrastructure for comparative documentation and joint conservation (Liu Zhong, 2016).

Dance Education and Artistic Creation. Dance curricula should include comparative regional modules that go beyond standardised U-Tsang styles using a three-dimensional pedagogical model that combines kinaesthetic training, visual motion analysis, and cultural interpretation, allowing students to understand regional movement vocabularies as culturally determined rather than stylistically arbitrary (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Luo Xiongyan, 2011). Choreographers should conduct extensive fieldwork before engaging with either tradition creatively, extracting core distinguishing features — Danba's wrist-driven aesthetics and flexible knee tremors; Changdu's sleeve dynamics and rhythmic footwork — while avoiding adaptations that cut off either tradition's connection to its ritual and narrative foundations (Gesang Namgyal, 2015). Systematic teaching textbooks for both regional traditions, developed in partnership with intangible cultural asset conservation institutions, would address the pedagogical infrastructure that is now lacking in both professional and school-based curricula.

Policy. Cultural authorities should transition from experience-driven to evidence-based heritage governance by commissioning systematic evaluations of whether inheritor certification rebuilds transmission chains, which traditional elements are most vulnerable under tourism commercialisation, and whether school-based heritage programs translate into durable

inheritance motivation—with findings communicated through policy advisory reports to support iterative policy refinement.

6.2 Research Contributions

This study contributes on three levels. Theoretically, it contributes to dance anthropology's understanding of the body-ecology relationship in ethnic minority performance by demonstrating that the difference between Danba and Changdu Guozhuang is a systemic expression of two distinct cultural ecologies encoded in movement, music, costume, performance mode, and transmission structure (Qiangba Qujie, 2013; Sklar, 2000). It also makes an original contribution by identifying two structurally distinct modes of female participation—"hidden dominance" in Danba and "dominant integration" in Changdu—providing a gendered analytical framework that extends beyond the ethnicity-centered lens dominant in existing scholarship and demonstrating that female subjectivity in intangible cultural heritage is regionally inflected rather than uniformly constructed (Henrion-Dourcy, 2004; Zhang, 2019).

The study is the first systematic comparative documentation of women's Guozhuang dance in both regions, generating a replicable descriptive vocabulary encompassing movement trajectory, tremor frequency, rotational range, musical mode, costume function, and formation structure that serves as an empirical foundation for conservation strategy, pedagogy, and future comparative research (Li, 2012; Zhang, 2020; Duoqi Ouzhu, 2017).

At the applied level, the comparative findings provide the region-specific analytical foundation required for conservation strategies that preserve the "diversity within unity" structure of Tibetan dance culture rather than flattening it through standardised representation (Ma Rong, 2018; Howard, 2016).

6.3 Future Studies

Four research directions are identified. First, longitudinal gender-focused research using oral history and life history methodologies should document female inheritors' subjective experiences and intergenerational transmission narratives across both regions, tracing the evolution of women's roles at critical historical junctures and investigating how female inheritors negotiate self-identity within state, market, and academic discourse (Henrion-Dourcy, 2004; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Feminist anthropological theories should be used to theoretically explain both Danba's "female-led model" and Changdu's "normalised participation model."

Second, the geographical scope of comparison should be broadened to include Guozhuang traditions in Yushu, Diqing, Nagqu, and Gannan, with the goal of developing a regional typological framework based on livelihood type and cultural region, providing systematic classification knowledge for ethnic dance pedagogy, comparative documentation, and cross-regional conservation coordination (Liu Qi, 2018; Ma Rong, 2018).

Third, digital humanities applications require focused research attention. Short-term priorities include standardised quantitative annotation of movement parameters to support replicable stylistic comparison; medium-term work should develop posture-recognition assistive teaching systems to address style distortion in non-native transmission environments; and long-term research should explore generative artificial intelligence applications to traditional dance transformation under frameworks that ensure technology serves cultural preservation.

Fourth, a systematic participatory evaluation of the effectiveness of intangible cultural heritage policies in both regions, including inheritor certification outcomes, commercialization-related cultural loss, school program impacts on identity formation, and the relationship between digital conservation and living transmission, would provide the evidence base required to drive the transition from experience-driven to evidence-based heritage governance (UNESCO, 2003; Howard, 2016).

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