

Uighur Dance: An Analysis of the Nationality and Cultural Connotation of Chinese Dance in Xinjiang

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Abstract

This study examines the historical origins, constituent elements, ethnic representation, and cultural connotations of Uyghur dance in Xinjiang, China, with particular attention to Maixilaipu, Daolang dance, and Shama dance. A qualitative, practice-based research design was employed, integrating documentary analysis, field investigation, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, questionnaire responses, audiovisual records, and reflective dance practice. Participants were selected purposively and included three experts, three professional dancers, and twenty members of the public. Data were analyzed thematically and comparatively across movement, music, costume, formation, regional context, and social meaning. The findings show that Uyghur dance developed through long-term interaction among local livelihoods, regional environments, religious traditions, and intercultural exchange along the Silk Road. Maixilaipu reflects communal celebration and social participation; Daolang dance embodies hunting, pastoral life, resilience, and collective cooperation; and Shama dance developed from ritual practice into a public cultural performance while retaining spiritual symbolism. The three forms share an integrated performance system in which movement, musical rhythm, costume, and spatial formation operate collaboratively. They also construct a multidimensional ethnic image characterized by enthusiasm, courage, agility, elegance, unity, resilience, and spirituality.

Keywords: Uyghur dance; Maixilaipu; Daolang dance; Shama dance; ethnic representation; cultural connotation

Introduction

Dance is a form of cultural expression that transcends linguistic, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. It serves as a medium through which historical experience, collective memory, religious belief, social practice, and aesthetic values are transmitted across generations. The dances of China's ethnic minority communities should therefore be understood not merely as performing arts intended for entertainment, but also as cultural practices through which communities maintain their identities and articulate cultural diversity within the broader framework of Chinese civilization. Previous research indicates that Uyghur dance emerged through sustained interactions among the music and dance traditions of the ancient Western Regions, the cultural networks of the Silk Road, Central Plains China, Central Asia, and West Asia. These historical encounters contributed to the diversity of its movement vocabulary, rhythmic structures, musical forms, costumes, performance conventions, and symbolic meanings (Liu and Sun 1999; Huo 2002; Li 2004; Wumaier 2015). In contemporary society, however, globalization, tourism development, modernization, and the adaptation of folk traditions for commercial and theatrical presentation may detach Uyghur dance from its original communal, ritual, and cultural contexts. Traditional dance may consequently be reduced to an attractive display of movements and costumes rather than understood as a living cultural system. Moreover, much of the existing scholarship concentrates on individual dance forms, technical movements, or isolated performance components. A more systematic investigation is therefore necessary to connect historical development, performance composition, ethnic representation, regional identity, and cultural meaning, while also identifying culturally appropriate approaches to preservation and contemporary development (Abulizi 2018; Lu 2021).

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region provides the principal geographical and cultural context for

this study. Located in northwestern China, Xinjiang historically functioned as an important center of mobility, trade, and intercultural exchange along the Silk Road. Its diverse environment including mountain ranges, basins, deserts, grasslands, and oasis-based agricultural settlements has shaped distinctive forms of social organization, livelihood, artistic expression, and cultural interaction. The long-term coexistence of Uyghur, Han, Kazakh, Hui, Kyrgyz, and other communities has also contributed to a regional culture characterized by both diversity and interaction. Within this setting, Uyghur dance traditions display shared cultural features as well as significant regional variations. Dances in southern Xinjiang are generally associated with oasis agriculture and are distinguished by refined, graceful, and delicate movements, whereas dances in northern Xinjiang tend to feature broader, more vigorous movements reflecting pastoral life and grassland culture (Dilina 2018). Against this background, the present study examines three representative traditions: Maixilaipu, commonly associated with Meshrep, which combines music, dance, games, social interaction, and community participation; Daolang dance, practiced particularly in Maigaiti, Bachu, and Awati, which reflects the resilience, courage, collective identity, and environmental experiences of communities living near the Taklamakan Desert; and Sama, also rendered as Shama, which is centered in Kashgar and other areas of southern Xinjiang and is closely connected with ritual practices, religious beliefs, and the historical transformation of sacred performance into communal cultural expression (Shi 2007; Li 2005; Wang 2015; Diliyar 2022). Examining these three traditions together makes it possible to understand how geography, livelihood, religion, music, costume, bodily movement, and social participation collectively construct Uyghur ethnic identity and cultural representation.

From an academic perspective, the study of Uyghur dance requires an integrated analytical framework capable of addressing its performative, humanistic, aesthetic, historical, and cultural dimensions. Dance performance theory provides a basis for examining movement structures, rhythmic patterns, spatial organization, group formations, performer interaction, and relationships between performers and audiences. A humanistic perspective emphasizes human experience, emotion, creativity, ways of life, and the meanings that performers and communities assign to dance. Dance aesthetics, meanwhile, facilitates an analysis of beauty, expression, symbolism, and the interconnected functions of the body, music, rhythm, costume, and performance space. Uyghur dance should therefore be interpreted as an integrated system of cultural symbols rather than as a collection of isolated movements or technical skills (Li, Luo, and Ji 1981; Gulinisha 2012; Maimaitimin 2013; Abduweli 2015a). Movements such as spinning, neck and shoulder articulation, hat lifting, rhythmic stepping, coordinated interaction with hand-drum music, and circular group formations possess technical and aesthetic significance while simultaneously communicating everyday experience, religious belief, collective memory, gender representation, and social relationships. Sama dance is especially significant in this respect because its development from a ritual practice into a broader form of community and stage performance must be examined through both historical and contemporary perspectives (Du 2015). Accordingly, the preservation and development of Uyghur dance should be guided by the principles of safeguarding living cultural heritage. Relevant practices include systematic documentation, digital preservation, transmission through tradition bearers and community participation, integration into formal and informal education, culturally informed stage adaptation, and responsible application in cultural tourism. Such approaches should preserve the social meanings and cultural contexts of the traditions rather than merely reproduce their external movements and visual forms (Chen 2019; Zhao 2020; Dilidar 2023).

Motivated by these historical, cultural, and academic concerns, the researcher seeks to investigate Uyghur dance in Xinjiang because Maixilaipu, Daolang, and Sama function simultaneously as artistic traditions, mechanisms of social interaction, expressions of ethnic identity, and repositories of collective memory. Despite their cultural significance, there remains a need for a systematic account that brings together their historical origins, constituent performance elements, regional variations, ethnic representations, and cultural meanings within a unified analytical framework. The present study therefore pursues two principal objectives. First, it investigates the historical origins and constituent

elements of Uyghur dance in Xinjiang, including movement vocabulary, musical accompaniment, rhythmic structures, costumes, performance formations, and the social and cultural settings in which performances occur. Second, it analyzes the ethnic representations and cultural meanings communicated through these dance traditions, particularly those associated with ways of life, religious beliefs, social relationships, historical memory, regional identity, and dance aesthetics. The study is expected to contribute a more systematic body of knowledge to research and teaching in the performing arts, support the preservation and transmission of Uyghur dance while maintaining the meanings valued by its communities, and provide a scholarly foundation for contemporary performance creation and cross-cultural communication. Its findings may also inform culturally responsible educational, cultural, and tourism initiatives, thereby strengthening the vitality, continuity, and long-term sustainability of Uyghur dance heritage in contemporary society.

Literature Review

Uyghur dance has generally been studied as a cultural form shaped by the long-term interaction of geography, history, ethnicity, religion, and artistic exchange. Historical and archaeological studies indicate that its foundations can be traced to the music and dance traditions of the ancient Western Regions, including the artistic cultures associated with Kucha and other Silk Road settlements. Mural paintings, historical documents, and studies of ancient performance forms suggest that bodily movements, rhythmic patterns, musical instruments, and costume styles circulated between Xinjiang, Central Plains China, Central Asia, Persia, and India (Wang and Huo 1998; Liu and Sun 1999; Huo 2002; Li 2004). Such exchanges did not simply replace local practices but became integrated with the daily life and cultural memory of Uyghur communities. Wumaier (2015) therefore describes the development of Uyghur dance as a historical process in which local traditions continuously absorbed and transformed external artistic influences. From this perspective, Uyghur dance represents both regional continuity and intercultural creativity.

Existing scholarship also emphasizes the influence of Xinjiang's diverse geographical and social environments on regional dance styles. The differences among oasis settlements, desert-edge communities, grassland regions, and urban cultural centers have produced distinctive movement qualities, musical characteristics, and performance practices. Research on regional styles indicates that dances in southern Xinjiang tend to feature delicate hand gestures, controlled neck and shoulder movements, flexible waist articulation, and relatively gentle rhythmic structures. These qualities are frequently associated with oasis agriculture and settled community life. By contrast, dances in northern Xinjiang often employ broader spatial movement, vigorous stepping, jumping, and stronger rhythmic patterns connected with pastoral and grassland environments (Guli Bahar 2012; Dilina Er 2018). Regional variation should therefore not be regarded as a superficial difference in performance style. Rather, it reflects the relationship between dance, environment, production, social organization, and local aesthetic preference.

Maixilaipu has received substantial scholarly attention because it combines dance with music, games, improvised expression, social interaction, and communal participation. It is commonly performed during weddings, festivals, harvest celebrations, and other collective occasions. Ayiguli (2003) argues that Maixilaipu serves social and educational functions by transmitting etiquette, cooperation, mutual respect, and community values. Shi (2007) similarly notes that its regional forms vary according to local cultural conditions while maintaining the shared functions of collective enjoyment and social cohesion. Studies of Maixilaipu movements identify knee trembling, shoulder articulation, wrist rotation, neck movement, circular formations, and improvised dance exchanges as central features of the form (Abduweli 2015a). Adili (2017b) further emphasizes improvisation as an important source of cultural creativity, allowing performers to express individual emotion while remaining within a collectively recognized tradition. These studies establish Maixilaipu as more than a performance genre: it is a living social institution through which cultural knowledge and group identity are reproduced.

Research on Daolang dance focuses mainly on its relationship with hunting culture, environmental

adaptation, and collective survival. The dance is associated particularly with communities living near the Tarim Basin and the desert-edge areas of southern Xinjiang. Li (2005) identifies Daolang dance as a distinctive regional tradition characterized by forceful movement, rapid stepping, strong rhythmic accents, and collective formations. Renaguli (2011) argues that gestures resembling drawing a bow, observing prey, chasing, and coordinated group movement preserve memories of hunting and productive life. Adili (2011) further proposes that Daolang dance contains multiple cultural influences derived from interactions among Uyghur, Mongolian, Turkic, and local traditions. Its artistic identity is therefore both regionally specific and culturally hybrid. Later studies emphasize that the contrast between strong male movements and more flexible female movements produces a complementary aesthetic of strength and softness (Dilonar 2018; Aihemaiti 2019). Collectively, this scholarship presents Daolang dance as an embodied narrative of resilience, environmental knowledge, cooperation, and regional identity.

Shama, or Sama, dance has been examined primarily through the perspectives of ritual, religious transformation, and spiritual symbolism. Scholars generally connect its early development with Shamanic practices, nature worship, and collective ceremonial movement. Adili (2010) argues that Shamanic cultural traces remain visible in bodily shaking, circular movement, and ritualized performance patterns. With the expansion of Islamic and Sufi traditions in Xinjiang, these earlier elements were reinterpreted through new religious meanings. Du (2015) identifies continuous rotation as a central symbol of spiritual elevation and transcendence, while Wang (2015) examines the relationship among rotational movement, religious practice, festival performance, and social participation. Lv (2019) further interprets Shama dance as a ritual structure in which body posture, direction of movement, music, and performance space operate together. More recent research suggests that Shama dance has gradually expanded beyond its sacred setting and become part of public festivals, stage productions, and cultural heritage activities (Diliyar 2022). Consequently, it represents both religious memory and a broader form of communal cultural identity.

Another important group of studies examines the technical and aesthetic elements of Uyghur dance. Characteristic movements such as knee trembling, neck articulation, shoulder movement, wrist rotation, stamping, sliding, and rapid spinning have often been analyzed as defining features of the Uyghur movement vocabulary. Gulinisha (2012) demonstrates that rhythm and emotional expression are closely connected, while Akbar (2016) interprets neck movement as both an aesthetic device and a culturally recognizable form of expression. Maimaitimin (2013) highlights the coordination between hand-drum rhythms and body language, showing that musical accompaniment does not merely support movement but actively structures its timing, energy, and emotional quality. These findings suggest that movement technique must be understood in relation to rhythm, emotion, and social meaning rather than as an isolated physical skill.

Costume has likewise been identified as a major component of Uyghur dance representation. Research on regional costume styles demonstrates that color, fabric, pattern, and accessories communicate gender, locality, belief, and aesthetic preference (Guli Bahar 2012). Ayinur (2014) argues that costume and movement create a coordinated visual system: wide skirts enhance rotational movement, embroidered patterns communicate cultural symbolism, and contrasting colors intensify the emotional atmosphere of performance. Flower hats, belts, headscarves, boots, and silver ornaments function not only as decoration but also as visible signs of ethnic belonging. Nevertheless, movement, music, and costume are frequently examined in separate studies. Less attention has been given to how they operate simultaneously as an integrated system of cultural representation.

The literature also reveals growing concern about the preservation and contemporary transformation of Uyghur dance. Modern stage production, tourism, commercialization, and digital circulation have expanded its visibility but may also separate recognizable movements and costumes from their historical and social contexts. Abulizi (2018) and Lu (2021) argue that the protection of ethnic dance requires the participation of communities, practitioners, cultural institutions, and educational

organizations. Gulimina (2014) supports the integration of traditional and modern dance but stresses the importance of retaining the cultural foundations of ethnic forms. School-based transmission has been proposed as a means of developing cultural awareness among younger generations, while digital documentation can preserve performance records and improve public access (Zhao 2020; Dilidar 2023). These approaches understand tradition as a living and adaptable process rather than a fixed artistic object.

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain in the existing literature. First, many studies focus on only one dance form, movement technique, regional style, or cultural function. Second, historical development, performance composition, ethnic representation, and cultural connotation are often discussed separately. Third, the coordinated relationship among movement, musical rhythm, costume, spatial formation, and performance context has not been examined systematically across Maixilaipu, Daolang dance, and Shama dance. The present study addresses these gaps by applying a unified analytical framework to the three representative traditions. It examines how historical origins, regional environments, movement systems, music, costume, social participation, and belief collectively construct Uyghur ethnic representation and transmit cultural meaning. This integrated approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Uyghur dance as a living cultural system rather than merely a collection of performance techniques.

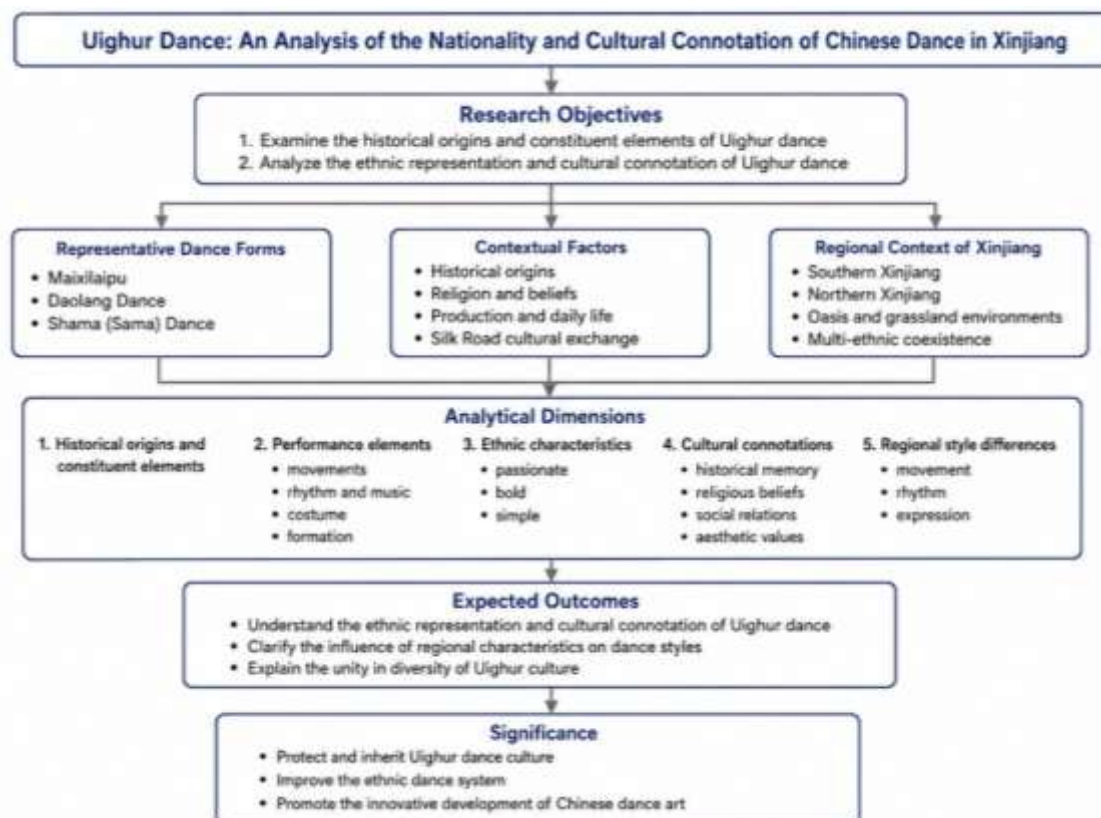


Figure. 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, practice-based research design to examine the historical origins, performance elements, ethnic characteristics, and cultural meanings of Uyghur dance in Xinjiang. Data are collected through literature review, fieldwork, interviews, observations, questionnaires, and audiovisual records. The study focuses on Maixilaipu, Daolang, and Shama dance in southern and northern Xinjiang from October 2025 to 2026.

Population and Sample

Participants are selected through purposive sampling and include three dance experts, three professional dancers, and twenty members of the public of different ages and genders. The study also analyzes selected performance videos, rehearsal records, regional dance works, and the researcher's practice-based activities.

Research Instruments

The research instruments include semi-structured interview questions, observation forms, questionnaires, audiovisual recording equipment, field notes, and relevant documentary sources. These tools are used to collect information on movement, music, costume, performance structure, regional style, and cultural meaning.

Data Collection Methods

Data are collected from books, journal articles, historical records, intangible cultural heritage documents, and online databases. Field data are obtained through interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, photography, video recording, and documentation of performances, rehearsals, and dance teaching activities.

Data Analysis

Textual data are categorized and analyzed thematically, while audiovisual materials are examined through comparative performance analysis. Findings from literature, interviews, observations, questionnaires, and practice records are triangulated to identify historical origins, performance features, regional differences, ethnic representations, and cultural connotations.

Research Results

Historical Development of Uyghur Dance

The findings indicate that Uyghur dance developed through long-term interaction among indigenous traditions, Silk Road cultures, religious beliefs, regional environments, and the livelihoods of communities in Xinjiang. Its development reflects a continuous process of cultural exchange rather than the evolution of an isolated artistic tradition. Elements from the ancient Western Regions, Central Plains China, Central Asia, and Persia were gradually incorporated into local music, movement, costume, and performance practices. Maixilaipu originated from communal celebrations and gradually became an important social activity associated with festivals, weddings, harvests, games, and collective entertainment. Its development demonstrates the close relationship between dance and everyday community life. Daolang dance emerged from hunting, farming, and pastoral practices among communities living near the Tarim Basin. Its movement vocabulary preserves experiences of survival, cooperation, physical labor, and adaptation to desert-edge environments. Shama dance originated from ancient ritual practices and later absorbed Sufi and Islamic cultural elements. Over time, it developed from a sacred ceremony into a communal festival performance while retaining ritual movements and spiritual symbolism.

Performance Elements of Uyghur Dance

The three dance forms share an integrated performance system consisting of movement, music, costume, formation, and performer interaction. These elements operate collaboratively rather than independently, producing distinctive emotional and cultural meanings. Maixilaipu is characterized by rhythmic trembling, swinging, rotating, wrist articulation, neck movements, improvisation, and collective interaction. Its performance often progresses from controlled and graceful movement to faster, more energetic sections. Musical accompaniment develops from free rhythm to slow and fast sections and commonly includes hand drums, dutar, rewap, suona, and other traditional instruments. Circular formations, clapping, improvised exchanges, and group participation strengthen its social and festive qualities. Daolang dance emphasizes sliding steps, strong stamping, body trembling, hunting-related gestures, vigorous rotation, and coordinated group formations. Its movements often simulate

drawing a bow, observing prey, advancing, retreating, and collective hunting. The music is based mainly on Daolang Muqam and creates a powerful narrative atmosphere through strong accents, progressive rhythms, and forceful percussion. Its performance structure communicates courage, tension, cooperation, and collective energy. Shama dance is distinguished by steady stepping, arm swinging, forward and backward body movements, continuous rotation, counterclockwise circular formations, and strong percussion accompaniment. The gradual acceleration of movement and rhythm creates a sense of spiritual intensity and collective unity. In all three traditions, costumes support movement quality while also communicating gender roles, regional identity, religious influence, social status, and cultural symbolism.

Regional Characteristics

The findings also reveal significant stylistic differences between southern and northern Xinjiang. Dance traditions in southern Xinjiang generally display refined gestures, controlled body movements, delicate emotional expression, and smoother rhythmic patterns. These qualities are closely related to oasis agriculture, settled communities, and long-established urban and village traditions. By contrast, dances in northern Xinjiang tend to employ larger movements, stronger steps, wider use of space, and more energetic rhythmic patterns. These features reflect the influence of grassland environments, pastoral lifestyles, and intercultural contact with neighboring ethnic communities. Nevertheless, the regional styles share common movement principles, musical foundations, and aesthetic values, demonstrating unity within the diversity of Uyghur dance culture.

Ethnic Representation

Uyghur dance presents a multidimensional ethnic image characterized by enthusiasm, courage, agility, resilience, unity, spirituality, hospitality, and cultural openness. Upright posture, rhythmic trembling, rapid rotation, facial expression, and interactive movements communicate confidence, optimism, and emotional vitality. Female movements generally emphasize flexibility, delicacy, curved body lines, and controlled elegance, whereas male movements highlight strength, stability, openness, and heroic energy. These gendered qualities function as complementary expressions of softness and strength rather than as completely separate performance systems. Music reinforces ethnic representation through contrasting rhythms, melodies, and instrumental sounds. Fast rhythms communicate celebration and passion, while slower and heavier rhythms express solemnity, devotion, or narrative tension. Brightly colored costumes, floral and geometric patterns, flower hats, belts, boots, headscarves, and jewelry function as visible symbols of Uyghur cultural identity. The close coordination among movement, music, and costume creates a recognizable and culturally meaningful image of the Uyghur people.

Cultural Connotations

The cultural meanings of Uyghur dance are closely connected with lifestyle, belief systems, historical memory, social relationships, and artistic aesthetics. Maixilaipu reflects oasis life, social interaction, communal celebration, hospitality, improvisation, and mutual support. Its circle formations and participatory activities reduce social distance and strengthen relationships among community members. Daolang dance expresses hunting culture, collective survival, courage, environmental adaptation, and cooperation. Its movement patterns preserve memories of physical labor and survival in demanding natural conditions. The dance therefore represents not only historical livelihoods but also the values of resilience, bravery, and collective responsibility. Shama dance conveys reverence for nature, religious devotion, ritual memory, and spiritual transformation. Continuous rotation and collective circular movement symbolize the relationship among the individual, the community, nature, and spiritual belief. Its transformation from ritual practice to festival performance illustrates how sacred meanings can be preserved while acquiring broader social and cultural functions. Across the three traditions, circular formations, synchronized steps, group interaction, and shared musical rhythms strengthen social cohesion and cultural identity. The incorporation of Central Plains, Central Asian, Persian, and other cultural elements further demonstrates the historical openness, adaptability, and inclusiveness of Uyghur culture.

Discussion

The present study was conducted according to two research objectives. The first objective examined the historical origins and constituent elements of Uyghur dance in Xinjiang, China, while the second analyzed the ethnic representations and cultural connotations expressed through Uyghur dance. The findings demonstrate that these two objectives are closely connected because the historical development and performance structure of Uyghur dance provide the foundation through which ethnic identity, collective memory, belief systems, and cultural values are communicated. Uyghur dance should therefore be understood not merely as a form of bodily movement, but as an integrated cultural system comprising movement, music, costume, performance space, social interaction, and historical experience.

The findings related to the first research objective revealed that Maixilaipu, Daolang dance, and Shama dance developed through long-term interaction among regional environments, local livelihoods, religious traditions, and intercultural exchange along the Silk Road. Maixilaipu originated from collective song-and-dance activities associated with festivals, weddings, harvests, games, and social gatherings. Daolang dance developed from the hunting, agricultural, and pastoral practices of communities living around the Tarim Basin, while Shama dance evolved from ancient ritual traditions and later incorporated Sufi and Islamic cultural elements before becoming a communal and festival performance. These findings indicate that the three dance forms were not created independently from social life; rather, they emerged from the historical experiences and survival practices of Uyghur communities. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies showing that Uyghur dance developed through interactions among the music and dance traditions of the ancient Western Regions, Central Plains China, Central Asia, and West Asia (Wang and Huo 1998; Liu and Sun 1999; Huo 2002; Li 2004; Wumaier 2015). It also corresponds with studies identifying Maixilaipu as a collective social activity, Daolang dance as an artistic representation of regional production and hunting life, and Shama dance as a performance shaped by ritual and religious transformation (Shi 2007; Renaguli 2011; Abduweli 2015a; Du 2015).

The findings further showed that Uyghur dance possesses a complete performance system consisting of movement, musical rhythm, costume, and spatial formation. Maixilaipu is characterized by knee trembling, shoulder movement, wrist rotation, neck movement, rapid turning, improvisation, and collective interaction. Daolang dance emphasizes sliding steps, stamping, vigorous bodily movement, hunting-related gestures, strong rotation, and coordinated group formations. Shama dance is distinguished by steady stepping, arm swinging, body inclination, continuous rotation, counterclockwise circular movement, and powerful percussion accompaniment. These elements are highly coordinated rather than functioning independently. Movement determines the rhythmic direction of the music, music supports the emotional quality of the movement, and costume enhances both movement visibility and cultural symbolism. This finding is consistent with dance performance theory, which regards movement, sound, costume, space, and performer interaction as interdependent components of performance. However, the present study extends earlier research by demonstrating that the artistic character of Uyghur dance is produced through the collaborative integration of movement symbols, musical rhythms, and costume symbols, rather than through movement technique alone.

The findings related to the second research objective revealed that Uyghur dance constructs a multidimensional ethnic image characterized by enthusiasm, courage, agility, elegance, resilience, unity, devotion, and cultural openness. These characteristics are communicated through upright body posture, controlled trembling, expressive neck and shoulder movements, rapid rotation, facial expression, collective formations, musical dynamics, and costume design. Female movements generally emphasize flexibility, delicacy, and flowing lines, whereas male movements highlight strength, stability, and heroic energy. Nevertheless, these differences do not represent a strict separation between masculinity and femininity; instead, they form a complementary aesthetic relationship between strength and softness. This finding corresponds with previous research concerning the balance of masculine and feminine qualities in Daolang dance and the emotional expression of characteristic

Uyghur movements (Aihemaiti 2019; Akbar 2016).

The results also demonstrated that the ethnic image of Uyghur dance is created through the combined effects of movement, music, and costume. Musical rhythms communicate different emotional and cultural qualities: Maixilaipu conveys festivity and sociability, Daolang music expresses strength and resilience, and Shama music creates a solemn and spiritual atmosphere. Costume colors, patterns, materials, and accessories reinforce these meanings. Red represents celebration and vitality, blue is associated with the sky and tranquility, green signifies the oasis and life, and yellow symbolizes sunlight and harvest. Floral and geometric patterns, flower hats, embroidered belts, boots, headscarves, and silver ornaments function as visible markers of Uyghur identity. These findings are consistent with dance aesthetics, which explains that artistic meaning emerges through the interaction of bodily form, rhythm, sound, color, and visual symbolism. They also support previous research showing that costume and movement work together to express Uyghur aesthetic values and cultural identity (Ayinur 2014; Guli Bahar 2012).

In relation to cultural connotations, the findings revealed four major dimensions: lifestyle, belief systems, social relationships, and artistic aesthetics. Maixilaipu reflects oasis life, social etiquette, collective celebration, improvisation, and mutual support. Its circle formations, handkerchief games, and dance competitions reduce social distance and strengthen community participation. This finding is consistent with Ayiguli's study, which described Maixilaipu as both an entertainment activity and a social space for transmitting moral values and cultural identity (Ayiguli 2003). It also supports Adili's argument that improvisation enables Maixilaipu to remain a living and creative form of cultural inheritance (Adili 2017).

Daolang dance expresses the historical memory of hunting, agriculture, environmental adaptation, collective survival, and cooperation. Movements such as drawing a bow, observing prey, stepping, sliding, and forming chains or circles reproduce the practical experiences of Daolang communities. These findings agree with Renaguli, who identified hunting movements as important cultural elements of Daolang dance, and with Adili, who argued that Daolang dance contains cultural influences from several ethnic traditions (Renaguli 2011; Adili 2011). However, the present study adds that these hunting-related movements should not be interpreted only as representations of past labor. They also symbolize resilience, collective responsibility, courage, and the ability of communities to adapt to harsh environmental conditions.

Shama dance conveys cultural meanings related to nature worship, ritual memory, religious devotion, spiritual elevation, and collective unity. Continuous rotation, counterclockwise circular movement, rhythmic stepping, and collective chanting transform religious concepts into bodily and artistic forms. These findings are consistent with Du's interpretation of rotation as a symbol of spiritual transcendence and with studies identifying the combined influence of Shamanic and Islamic traditions in Shama dance (Adili 2010; Du 2015; Lv 2019; Diliyar 2022). Nevertheless, the present research differs from studies that emphasize only the religious origins of Shama dance. The findings show that Shama dance has also acquired secular and social functions through its performance at festivals and public cultural events. It therefore represents both religious memory and contemporary community identity.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends dance performance and cultural representation theories by demonstrating that Uyghur dance functions as an integrated cultural system rather than a collection of separate techniques. Movement, musical rhythm, costume, spatial formation, and performance context operate collaboratively to communicate ethnic identity, historical memory, religious belief, and social values. The findings therefore support a multidimensional approach to dance analysis in which technical, aesthetic, historical, and cultural elements are examined together. The study also contributes to humanistic and dance-aesthetic perspectives by showing that Maixilaipu, Daolang dance, and Shama dance transform everyday life, environmental adaptation, collective relationships, and spiritual beliefs into embodied cultural symbols. Although the three forms have different historical and regional

foundations, they share common functions in preserving cultural memory and strengthening ethnic identity. This framework may be applied to the study of other traditional dances shaped by regional diversity, intercultural exchange, and religious transformation.

Practical Implications

The findings provide practical guidance for preserving, teaching, and presenting Uyghur dance. Cultural institutions, schools, and dance companies should teach Maixilaipu, Daolang, and Shama dance together with their historical background, musical structure, costume symbolism, regional context, and social functions. This approach can prevent traditional dance from being reduced to isolated movements or stage entertainment. The study also supports the development of community-based transmission, digital archives, educational programs, and culturally responsible stage adaptations. Choreographers and tourism organizations should retain the core meanings of each dance while introducing appropriate contemporary techniques. Such practices can strengthen cultural identity, improve public understanding, support intergenerational transmission, and promote cross-cultural communication without weakening the traditions' cultural foundations.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Uyghur dance in Xinjiang is a living cultural system shaped by historical development, regional environments, social practices, religious beliefs, and intercultural exchange. Maixilaipu, Daolang dance, and Shama dance possess distinct origins and performance characteristics, yet all integrate movement, music, costume, and collective formation to communicate cultural meaning. The findings further demonstrate that Uyghur dance represents ethnic qualities such as enthusiasm, courage, resilience, unity, grace, and spirituality. It also preserves historical memory, community relationships, belief systems, and regional identity. Therefore, the preservation and contemporary development of Uyghur dance should maintain its cultural foundations while supporting appropriate innovation through education, community transmission, digital documentation, stage performance, and cross-cultural communication.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited by its qualitative design, purposive participant selection, and restricted geographical coverage. The analysis focused primarily on selected examples of Maixilaipu, Daolang dance, and Shama dance, while regional variations across Xinjiang were not examined comprehensively. In addition, the study relied mainly on documentary sources, interviews, observations, and audiovisual records; therefore, the relationships among movement, music, and costume were not tested quantitatively. The perspectives of folk inheritors in remote communities and practitioners from different generations were also represented only to a limited extent. Future research should expand fieldwork to more regions of Xinjiang and include larger and more diverse groups of performers, inheritors, educators, and community members. Motion-capture technology, rhythmic analysis, and audiovisual coding may be used to examine the coordination among movement, music, and costume more precisely. Further studies should also investigate how Uyghur dance is transformed in contemporary stage productions, education, tourism, digital media, and cross-cultural communication. Comparative and interdisciplinary research may provide a deeper understanding of cultural adaptation, intergenerational transmission, and the sustainable development of Uyghur dance heritage.

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