

## **The Flexible Reinvention of Kun Classical Dance in 21st-century China**

**Yalinzi He**

Faculty of Creative Arts, Universiti Malaya

**Sang Woo Ha**

Faculty of Creative Arts, Universiti Malaya

**Kwan Yie Wong**

Faculty of Creative Arts, Universiti Malaya

### **Abstract**

This study examines the flexible reinvention of Chinese Kun classical dance in 21st-century China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, nationalist cultural policies have promoted the institutionalization of Chinese classical dance as a disciplinary system. Within this framework of reinvented traditions, dance practitioners developed new forms such as Shenyun, Dunhuang and Han-Tang dance. Continuing this trajectory of reinvention, Ma Jiaqin—Chinese famous dancer and acknowledged founder of Kun Classical Dance—launched its reinvention in 2004. Employing qualitative methods, this study investigates the mechanisms of Kun classical dance's reinvention and the historical conditions that shaped its emergence. The findings indicate that Kun classical dance was a reinvented tradition characterized by cultural flexibility, shaped by state-led cultural revivalism in post-1949 China, particularly the dual agendas of reviving tradition and promoting cultural innovation in the post-reform era. Its formation demonstrates a strategic negotiation between artistic practice and cultural institutions, reflecting both compliance with state cultural policies and engagement in discourses of national identity.

**Keywords:** Chinese Kun classical dance, cultural policy, flexible reinvention, national and cultural identity

## Introduction

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, cultural development has been regarded as a vital component of socialist construction. Mao Zedong's cultural policy—"making the past serve the present, making foreign things serve China; let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend"—not only underscores the strategic orientation of cultural governance but also offers a theoretical foundation and policy support for various artistic domains, including dance (Society of the National History of the People's Republic of China, 1999; Ma, 2019). Within this policy framework, Chinese classical dance has gradually been systematized into a professional discipline since the 1950s. While drawing on traditional opera, its training system has been profoundly shaped by Soviet ballet techniques, resulting in a hybrid structure.

Entering the reform and opening-up period in 1978, China's cultural field underwent unprecedented transformation and liberalization. As global cultural resources flowed in, Western dance techniques, choreographic concepts, and educational systems were introduced into China on a large scale, significantly enriching and reshaping the expressive vocabulary and creative logic of domestic dance practices (Yin, personal communication, 2022). In response, dance practitioners began to revisit local cultural resources, actively exploring the relationship between traditional bodily expression and contemporary aesthetics. This led to the development of multiple stylistic systems in Chinese classical dance, such as Shenyun classical dance (身韵古典舞), Dunhuang classical dance (敦煌古典舞) and Han-Tang classical dance (汉唐古典舞), that aimed to construct uniquely Chinese bodily languages. These styles strategically reinterpret historical imagery through modern choreography while selectively incorporating foreign elements, thus aligning with national cultural strategies and addressing the practical demands of international cultural engagement.

In this context, in 2004, Ma Jiaqin established Kun classical dance at the Nanjing University of the Arts, marking a new generation of classical dance following the emergence of Shenyun, Han-Tang and Dunhuang. Kun classical dance not only introduced a distinct bodily vocabulary and aesthetic framework, but also provoked discourse on the mechanisms of traditional construction and cultural legitimacy.

Accordingly, this study addresses two central problems: Firstly, why did dance practitioners choose to reinvent Kun classical dance despite the existence of several established classical dance systems? Secondly, how was Kun classical dance reinvented and legitimized as a newly emerging tradition?

To address these questions, this study adopts Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) theory of the invented tradition to examine the emergence of Kun classical dance. Hobsbawm contended that many traditions perceived as ancient are, in fact, deliberately constructed in modern societies to serve specific political and ideological purposes. The core mechanism of such invention lies in the strategic deployment of repetition, ritual and symbolic systems to produce a sense of historical continuity and collective cultural identity. In addition, He pointed out that these invented traditions are intrinsically linked to the formation of national identity, the consolidation of nationalism, and broader cultural governance strategies. From this perspective, the invention of Kun classical dance emerges not solely from historical reproduction, but also as the outcome of intentional and flexible invention by dance practitioners operating under the directive influence of national cultural policies. At the same time, this study highlights the use of 'reinvention' rather than simply 'invention.' While invention suggests the creation of wholly new cultural forms, reinvention better captures how traditions operate in contemporary contexts: existing symbols, movements and aesthetic resources are selectively recombined and ideologically reinterpreted. Kun classical dance, as a tradition, is not a mere reproduction of history but a continual reshaping of historical fragments in line with current cultural and political demands. Thus, reinvention more precisely reflects the dynamic, negotiated and state-influenced processes underpinning the construction of tradition and constitutes the core analytical category of this study.

In order to further analyze the mechanism underlying such reinvention, this study also draws on the concept of cultural flexibility proposed by Lin Yatin (2010). In her article "Choreographing a Flexible Taiwan: Cloud Gate Dance Theater and Taiwan's Changing Identity," Lin argued that dance practitioners constructed a choreographic language that strategically integrates modern dance, ballet, Tai Chi and martial arts to articulate a cultural expression that is both nationally specific and globally legible, responding directly to the policy imperatives of the Taiwanese government. In contrast, although mainland China did not undergo

colonial rule, it has, since the Opium War of 1840, been profoundly affected by Western imperialist incursions, the collapse of the feudal order, and successive waves of social transformation. Particularly during the Cultural Revolution following the founding of the People's Republic, traditional culture suffered severe devastation, leaving the early development of dance in the new state with scarcely any historical models to draw upon (Wang & Long, 1999).

It was precisely within this historical and institutional context that dance practitioners in mainland China demonstrated a marked degree of cultural flexibility. On the one hand, they reconstructed tradition within the state-endorsed framework of national character and traditionality to meet the political demands of cultural nation-building; on the other, they actively absorbed Western training methods and aesthetic forms to respond to contemporary expectations for artistic innovation and expressive power. Through this dual strategy, they were able to construct, under the new political order, a form of tradition capable of securing broad social recognition. Building on this insight, this study argues that the invention of Kun classical dance similarly embodies such strategies of cultural flexibility: practitioners not only drew upon indigenous cultural resources such as Kun opera and calligraphy, but also consciously integrated the bodily training systems of Western ballet, thereby reorganising movement techniques and aesthetic structures to enable the flexible reinvention of tradition.

In sum, this study integrates Hobsbawm's theory of invented tradition and Lin Yatin's concept of cultural flexibility to examine the invention of Chinese classical Kun classical dance in the 21st century. The study found that the flexible reinvention of Kun classical dance not only exemplifies dance practitioners' proactive engagement with the complex interplay between national cultural policies and global cultural dynamics, but also illuminates their strategic integration of indigenous and foreign cultural resources. This process enables the construction of a Kun classical dance that simultaneously upholds cultural legitimacy and artistic distinctiveness, navigating the tensions between historical continuity and contemporary innovation.

### **Studies on Chinese Kun Classical Dance**

Since the preliminary establishment of the Kun classical dance in 2004, this dance form has gradually attracted scholarly attention and has been explored across multiple research dimensions. In early studies, in her article “Development of Kun Dance upon the Art of the Kun Opera - One of the Series of Kun Opera and Kun Dance,” Ma (2008) provided an initial overview of the origins of Kun classical dance and its historical connections with Kun opera. Ma emphasised that while Kun classical dance absorbs the aesthetic movements of Kun opera, it has also developed its own distinctive dance vocabulary, including the embodiment of Kun opera techniques and postures in bodily movement. Chen (2011) focused on the formal structure and principles of bodily movement, systematically analysing Kun classical dance’s characteristics in spatial construction (such as stage patterns), rhythmic organization (alternating dynamic and lyrical tempos), and movement composition (integration of opera gestures with codified dance forms), rhythmic organization, and movement composition, thereby deepening the understanding of its artistic mechanisms.

With the advancement of Kun classical dance creation and pedagogical practice, more scholars have begun to pay attention to its positioning and evolution within the contemporary context. Wang and Liu (2020) emphasized the construction principles of Kun classical dance’s aesthetic style and highlighted its aesthetic independence within the genealogy of Chinese contemporary classical dance. Through stage performance analyses of the representative Kun classical dance work “Intoxicated in March” (情醉三月天), which exemplifies Kun classical dance’s choreographic style and cultural expressivity, Yang (2017) revealed how Kun classical dance conveys emotional tension and cultural meaning through narrative constructions of character images. Moreover, Song (2024) extended Kun classical dance research into digital media environments, exploring its mechanisms of online dissemination and visual reproduction, indicating that Kun classical dance is gradually entering a new phase of mediated existence. Through comparative research with the Shenyun classical dance style, Jia (2023) uncovered differences and complementarities between Kun classical dance and other dance genres in terms of bodily style, cultural logic and aesthetic

orientation, providing a reference frame for understanding Kun classical dance's positioning within the overall Chinese classical dance genealogy.

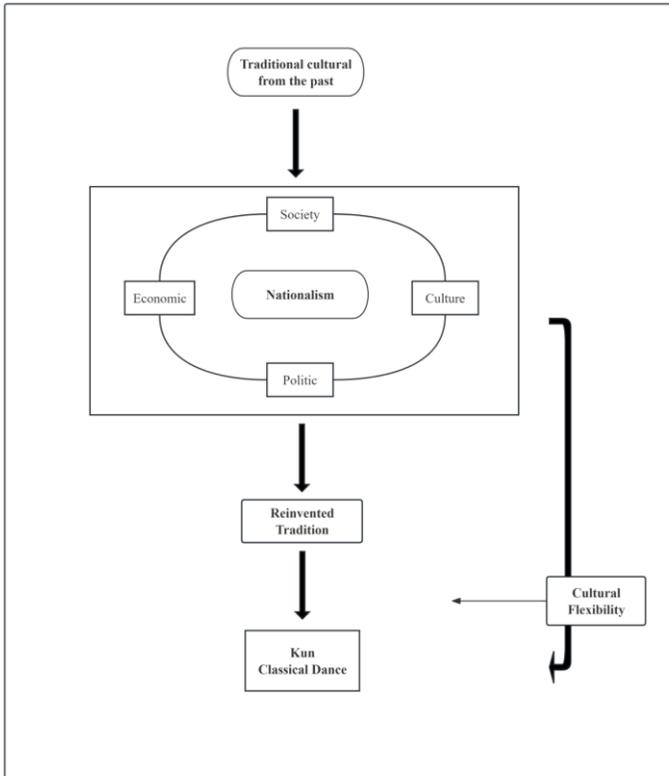
Although the aforementioned studies have expanded understanding of Kun classical dance from various perspectives, significant gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies remain at a descriptive level, with insufficient in-depth exploration of its reinvention logic, embedding of national cultural policies and pathways to legitimacy construction.

Furthermore, dance practice rarely operates as an isolated artistic activity but is deeply influenced by multiple institutional factors such as state ideology, social structures, and economic conditions. As Gilmore (2000) pointed out in her study of Philippine folk dance, the performance and legitimization of cultural traditions is a complex social negotiation process, in which cultural practitioners must select and reorganize cultural resources amid multiple power relations to meet expectations of authenticity. Similarly, in her research on Javanese dance in Indonesia, Hughes-Freeland (2008) emphasized the significant role of dance in nation-state cultural construction, both reflecting community culture and serving the shaping of national identity. These comparative Asian studies are included here because they illuminate the broader mechanisms through which traditional dances are legitimized under national cultural agendas, thereby offering valuable perspectives for analysing the reinvention of Kun classical dance in China. In addition, Wilcox's research on the Chinese dance (2019) provided a crucial framework, particularly in examining how institutional forces and aesthetic strategies intertwine and jointly promote the development and inheritance new 'traditions.'

However, current research on how national policies specifically influence traditional dance forms remains insufficient, particularly in the Chinese context, where systematic analysis of the interactions between cultural governance mechanisms and artistic practice is still lacking. To address these theoretical and macro-level gaps, this study provides an in-depth examination of the reinvention motives, generative mechanisms, and legitimation pathways of Kun classical dance, offering a new research approach for understanding Chinese classical dance as a project of national cultural identity.

### Theoretical Framework

This study constructs its theoretical foundation by integrating Eric Hobsbawm’s theory of the invention of tradition (1993) and Yatin Lin’s concept of cultural flexibility (2010). These two frameworks are methodologically and conceptually complementary, enabling a comprehensive analysis of how Kun classical dance has been reinvented within the shifting socio-political contexts of contemporary China (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** A theoretical framework consisting of two concepts.

Firstly, this study utilizes Hobsbawm’s theory of the invention of tradition to explore the reasons for the reinvention of Kun classical dance within the specific social context of China. As he observed “‘Tradition’

which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm, 1993: 1). He further emphasised that “one specific interest of ‘invented traditions’ ... They are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the ‘nation’ with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest” (13). Furthermore, he noted that

Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm, 1993: 1)

From Hobsbawm’s perspective, the so-called ‘traditions’ that people uphold and celebrate may not be as ancient and authentic as commonly believed. Instead, they may be the latest reinventions created by elites for specific purposes or adaptations of older ones to legitimate their power and foster a sense of national identity. His perspective aligns with the reinvention of Kun classical dance. In China, as the national government promotes the revival of traditional culture, dance practitioners have begun to practice and reinvent Chinese classical dance to promote the development and prosperity of China’s socialist culture. Therefore, Hobsbawm’s theory thus provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the political and symbolic functions embedded in the invention of Kun classical dance. However, this study privileges the notion of reinvention over the concept of invention, as the former better accounts for the ways in which tradition operates in contemporary settings through the selective recombination and ideological reframing of existing cultural resources. In the case of Kun classical dance, what is recognised as tradition emerges not from simple replication of the past but from the continual reorganisation of historical fragments to address present cultural and political imperatives, thereby highlighting the dynamic, negotiated, and state-shaped processes that underpin its construction.

Furthermore, this study recognises that Lin’s concept of cultural flexibility was developed in the Taiwanese democratic context through her analysis of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. Although Taiwan’s socio-political circumstances differ significantly from those of mainland China, Lin’s theoretical insights remain valuable because they illuminate choreographic strategies of adaptation and hybridity. In her article, Lin pointed out that

Cloud Gate's dancers have formed their own unique bodily aesthetics based on the long-term hybrid training of ballet, Western modern dance techniques, Chinese martial arts and Hsiung's brand of taichi daoyin. It is this versatile and embody the multiple waves of influences from within Taiwan and abroad, reflecting the cultural flexibility of Taiwan on a choreographically grounded level. (Lin, 2010: 252)

Building on this perspective, the present research adopts cultural flexibility not as a socio-political parallel but as an analytical lens for artistic practice. In the case of Kun classical dance, practitioners—though embedded within a socialist state structure—also mobilise flexible choreographic strategies to negotiate between state directives, classical vocabularies, and contemporary demands. In this way, Lin's concept extends its explanatory power beyond the Taiwanese context, providing a productive framework for understanding how Kun classical dance is reinvented as a traditional form under evolving ideological agendas.

To sum up, although Hobsbawm and Lin focus on distinct geographical and disciplinary contexts, both theories highlight how tradition is not static but actively shaped, negotiated, and repurposed to serve contemporary needs. By applying this integrated perspective, the study offers a multidimensional understanding of how Chinese classical dance has been reinvented within evolving historical, political, and cultural contexts. This framework not only deepens scholarly insight into the mechanisms of cultural invention in China, but also contributes to broader discussions in dance studies, cultural policy, and national identity formation.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research approach, integrating interviews, observations and document analysis to systematically investigate the reinvention process and cultural legitimation mechanisms of Kun classical dance within the contemporary sociopolitical context of China.

Firstly, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with four key informants from diverse fields: the founder of Kun classical dance, a university-based Kun classical dance instructor, a scholar specializing in Chinese classical dance, and a staff member from the Sichuan cultural department. These interviewees were selected purposively because they represent different but interconnected perspectives across creation, pedagogy, academic theorization and state cultural administration. Together, their narratives provide a balanced understanding of how Kun classical dance has been shaped and institutionalized.

Secondly, this study employs an ethnographic approach, with the researchers directly participating in the training and performance practices of Kun classical dance, thereby generating authentic and comprehensive first-hand data. Ethnography not only enables a nuanced understanding of the invention of Kun classical dance but also mitigates the risk of over-interpretation or distortion by combining direct observation with practitioners' perspectives rather than relying solely on textual sources or secondary accounts. Through sustained interaction and continuous engagement with the dance community, this approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in lived experience and cultural context. Accordingly, the researchers' systematic observations were conducted through online teaching courses and performance recordings, with particular attention to technical training, aesthetic practices, and pedagogical strategies. These observations facilitated an understanding of how Kun classical dance is interpreted, enacted, and normalised within specific educational contexts, thus providing a robust empirical foundation for theoretical inquiry.

Finally, the study undertook a comprehensive review and analysis of national-level cultural policy documents, government publications, and institutional texts. The policy analysis specifically focused on the long-standing discourses of 'let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend' and 'making the past serve the present and the foreign serve China,' the guidelines on intangible cultural heritage protection issued by the Ministry of Culture since 2000, and the policy frameworks from 2004 to 2015 that explicitly linked traditional arts to the construction of national cultural identity. By situating the formation and development of Kun classical dance within a broader historical and ideological framework, the analysis sheds light on the institutional structures and cultural motivations underpinning Kun classical dance as a reinvented

tradition. Through methodological triangulation and the use of diverse data sources, this study provides a comprehensive account of the reinvention of Kun classical dance, positioning it as a strategic cultural practice central to the construction of national cultural identity.

### **Chinese Classical Dance and National Cultural Identity: The Flexible Reinvention of Kun Classical Dance**

To comprehensively understand the reinvention mechanism of Kun classical dance, it is essential to situate its emergence within the broader socio-political context of contemporary China and the evolving landscape of national cultural policy. This study focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the institutional impetus derived from state cultural policy, the complex motivations underlying the reinvention of Kun classical dance, and the reinvention process alongside its trajectories toward cultural legitimation. The study speculates that the emergence of Kun classical dance was not a historical contingency, but rather the outcome of strategic interactions between artistic agency and institutional power within a specific historical configuration. It reflects a high degree of cultural flexibility embedded in policy-oriented cultural practices. Such a mechanism not only responds to the directives of national cultural governance but also reveals the practical logic of cultural identity construction at the intersection of globalization and cultural revitalization.

### **National Cultural Policy as the Institutional Basis for the Diversification of Chinese Classical Dance**

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the central government has introduced a series of cultural policies aimed at reviving national traditions. According to Yin Zhizhong in an interview, a staff member at the Sichuan Provincial Department of Culture, the Chinese government has issued thousands of policies related to the revitalization of traditional culture since the Mao era. These policies are largely guided by ideological principles such as the 1956 slogan of "Let a hundred flowers bloom and let a hundred schools of thought contend" and Mao Zedong's 1964 directive of "using the past to serve the present and using the foreign

for China's purposes." Both principles were subsequently revived and reinterpreted by dance practitioners, especially after the reform and opening-up policies in 1978, when they were implemented as guiding frameworks for the reinvention of Chinese classical dance (Yin, personal communication, 2022). The former advocates the selective appropriation of both traditional Chinese and foreign cultural resources to serve contemporary needs, while the latter promotes diversity and open exploration in artistic and academic domains. Collectively, these policies have not only provided a theoretical framework and practical direction for the development of traditional dance but have also encouraged dance practitioners to innovate stylistically on the basis of cultural heritage. As a result, the emergence of diverse Chinese dance forms has been actively supported and institutionally legitimized.

The post-1978 era, marked by the reform and opening-up policies, represented a critical historical juncture when these earlier ideological principles were operationalized by artists with greater autonomy. This period witnessed an ideological relaxation that afforded artists greater creative autonomy while still operating within the boundaries delineated by the state. Such a policy environment facilitated the integration of intercultural elements and diverse aesthetic strategies, resulting in the emergence of multiple distinctive classical dance forms characterized by a dual commitment to Chinese cultural identity and cultural flexibility (Yin, personal communication, 2022).

For example, Shenyun classical dance exemplifies this cultural flexibility by synthesizing movement vocabularies drawn from traditional Chinese opera, martial arts, folk dance, Western ballet, and modern dance to create a unique and systematic approach to physical training (Deng, personal communication, 2022). Similarly, Han-Tang classical dance is informed by archaeological materials, such as murals, sculptures and images, and incorporates aesthetic elements, such as calligraphy and folk dance to evoke historical continuity through contemporary choreography (Wang, personal communication, 2022). Dunhuang classical dance derives its bodily expressions directly from the visual language and iconography of Dunhuang murals, further illustrating the strategic reinterpretation of heritage within modern artistic frameworks (Xie, 2023).

Similar to these traditions, Kun classical dance also embodies these dynamics. Ma Jiaqin, the founder of Kun classical dance, explicitly

acknowledged the profound influence of national cultural policies on the formation of Kun classical dance, emphasizing not only the ideological orientation provided by state directives but also the concrete role of governmental support. In particular, she received financial backing from Jiangsu Province, which enabled sustained research, stage experimentation, and the establishment of Kun classical dance's stylistic system (Ma, personal communication, 2022). As Yin noted, the development of Chinese classical dance corresponds with overarching policy directives, such as making the past serve the present, making foreign elements serve China, and letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend (personal communication, 2001). These policy slogans collectively reflect the state's dual objectives of heritage preservation and fostering creative diversity within the arts.

The interview data demonstrate the proactive and facilitative role of the Chinese state—both at central and local levels—in fostering innovation within classical dance. Institutional backing, including direct funding and curricular support, not only legitimized new stylistic reinventions but also situated them firmly within the framework of national cultural governance. This highlights the intertwined nature of artistic agency and policy imperatives in contemporary China (Yin, personal communication, 2022; Ma, personal communication, 2022).

In sum, the Chinese government, through policy-driven cultural governance, has established a framework that encourages stylistic experimentation and methodological innovation under the banner of cultural pluralism, thereby cultivating the institutional soil necessary for the reinvention of Kun classical dance. The following section further explores the specific motivations behind this cultural invention.

### **Multiple Motivations Behind the Reinvention of Kun Classical Dance**

The reinvention of Kun classical dance did not arise from a singular impetus but emerged through the complex interplay of national cultural policies, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) frameworks, local cultural strategies, and the creative agency of individual practitioners. According to Ma Jiaqin, founder of Kun classical dance, a key cultural catalyst was

UNESCO's 2001 inscription of Kun Opera on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. As the sole Chinese entry at that time, Kun Opera garnered significant attention, generating a dual pressure from national and international cultural capitals that prompted a systematic institutional response focused on its protection, transformation and dissemination (Ma Jiaqin, 2008). This policy context created a window of opportunity for contemporary reinterpretations of Kun opera cultural resources and provided legitimacy for the conceptualization of Kun classical dance.

However, the initial impetus for Kun classical dance predates the ICH designation. As Ma recalled, her inventive inspiration emerged earlier, during the 1997 production of the dance drama “Ganjiang and Moye” (干将莫邪), which had been performed over a hundred times both domestically and abroad by the early 2000s (China News, 2004). The success of the production attracted the attention of Suzhou cultural authorities, who commissioned a new re-creative project. Rather than merely reproducing traditional narratives, Ma proposed to delve into the symbolic imagery embedded within Kun Opera. Supported by local policy, she initiated “Kun Yun” (昆韵), a dance-poem project aimed at translating Kun Opera's cultural motifs into contemporary dance language. As Ma emphasized, “‘Ganjiang and Moye’ demonstrated that tradition could be transformed into a form of modern theatrical expression. Kun Opera's six-century heritage demands even greater creative engagement” (Ma, personal communication, 2022). Ma consciously turned to Kun Opera as the first cultural source not only because of its six-century historical depth and symbolic resonance, but also because Kun Opera had strong cultural presence in the Jiangsu region, particularly in Suzhou and Nanjing, where local governments and institutions actively supported it. This regional prominence, combined with state-led cultural revivalism, positioned Kun Opera as a natural yet strategic resource for experimentation.

The production of “Kun Yun” marked not only a symbolic reinterpretation of Kun opera culture through dance, but also established foundational aesthetic and technical systems for Kun classical dance. Central to this process was the manifestation of the embodied cosmology of *qiyun* (气韵), which Ma interpreted as the vital energy and rhythmic spirit animating Kun Opera performance. In Kun classical dance, *qiyun* was re-embodied through the conscious coordination of breath, intention

(*yinian*), and movement flow, thereby linking the metaphysical aesthetics of Kun opera with the physical vocabulary of contemporary dance. This artistic experiment triggered a series of institutional and academic momentum: in 2005, Nanjing University of the Arts and Suzhou municipal authorities jointly initiated research on Kun classical dance vocabulary; in 2006, the inaugural Kun classical dance Symposium convened; in 2007, a formal higher education training base was established; and in 2009 and 2013, international academic conferences further consolidated Kun classical dance's scholarly legitimacy.

Collectively, these developments reveal that Kun classical dance's reinvention was not merely a reactive measure to Kun Opera's ICH recognition but the product of synergistic forces including national policy directives, regional cultural competition (particularly Nanjing and other cultural hubs seeking to position their heritage traditions as nationally significant), and the creative agency of dance practitioners. As Ma candidly noted, "I was not originally from a Kun opera background, but under the encouragement of national cultural policies and governmental affirmation, I gradually embarked on the path of reinventing Kun classical dance" (Ma, personal communication, 2022). This illustrates how individual dance practitioner operates within and responds to state cultural discourses, and how institutional frameworks facilitate innovative artistic forms in contemporary China. In line with Hobsbawm's (1983) theory of invented tradition, which argues that traditions are often strategically invented under specific historical and political conditions, Kun classical dance's emergence exemplifies how traditional dance forms in modern China are mobilized and structured within the framework of cultural governance. The following section further examines Kun classical dance's reinvention process and the mechanisms underlying its construction of cultural legitimacy.

### **The Reinvention Process of Kun Classical Dance and Its Construction of Cultural Legitimacy**

Since the inception of the Kun classical dance system, Ma Jiaqin has consistently rooted her creative endeavours in Kun opera. She regards Kun opera — with over six centuries of historical depth — not only as a mature theatrical form, but also as a repository of emotional expressivity, aesthetic

philosophy, and symbolic meaning (Ma, personal communication, 2022). This epistemological orientation underpins the cultural continuity between Kun classical dance and Kun opera and provides a foundation for conceptualizing Kun classical dance as a reinvented tradition. However, other practitioners have echoed this perspective, noting that Kun opera offers a living archive from which choreographers can draw embodied vocabularies for new stage practices (Wang Haitao, personal communication, 2022).

Reflecting on her inventive trajectory, Ma Jiaqin (2022) noted that although she did not come from a Kun opera background, state cultural policies and institutional support enabled her to engage deeply with Kun opera resources and initiate the reinvention of Kun classical dance. To bridge the professional gap, she sought mentorship from prominent Kun opera practitioners in Suzhou, including Shi Xiaomei and Wang Fang (personal communication, 2022). Through this engagement and two years of sustained field research and stage experimentation, Ma and her team developed a systematic and stylistically distinctive movement vocabulary for Kun classical dance. Tao Yuan, one of Ma's students who later became a dance faculty member, confirmed that this early experimentation laid the pedagogical foundation upon which the current training curriculum was built (Tao, personal communication, 2022).

In the process of constructing the Kun classical dance lexicon, Ma deliberately avoided simply replicating the traditional operatic role categories such as *sheng* (生), *dan* (旦), *jing* (净), *mo* (末) and *chou* (丑). Instead, she extracted and reinterpreted expressive gestures and formal principles inherent in signature Kun opera techniques. For instance, fundamental hand positions, such as back (背), palm (掌), push (推), pull (拉) and the “five-finger lotus” (五指莲花式), were innovatively adapted from Kun opera motifs (Ma, personal communication, 2022). Scholars of Chinese classical dance, such as Tao (2022), have also pointed out that this strategy of selective borrowing is a common feature of classical dance reinvention, situating Kun classical dance within a broader pattern of cultural reconstruction.

Moreover, Ma developed a comprehensive 27-point spatial orientation framework that articulates the spatial configuration of the dance and governs bodily movement through a consciously directed

internal intention, known in Kun classical dance as *yinian* (意念). Complementing this, her renowned “21-character formula” systematically organizes the movement vocabulary into three interrelated dimensions: physical form, including *han* (含), *chen* (沉), *shun* (顺), *lian* (连),  *yuan* (圆), *qu* (曲), *qing* (倾); kinetic rhythm, including *shang* (上), *xia* (下), *ping* (平), *ru* (入), *tui* (推), *la* (拉), *yan* (延); and aesthetic state, including *ya* (雅), *chun* (纯), *song* (松), *piao* (飘), *qing* (轻), *rou* (柔), *miao* (妙) (Ma, 2008). Through sustained engagement with Kunqu opera, dance practitioners have refined and expanded these distinctive Kun classical dance vocabularies. Interviewees from the Nanjing University of the Arts emphasized that the codification of these frameworks enabled Kun classical dance to be taught systematically, transforming Ma’s personal innovations into transmissible knowledge (Tao, personal communication, 2022). This typological model functions dually as a choreographic methodology and a pedagogical framework, thereby providing structural coherence and stylistic consistency within Kun classical dance’s evolving artistic repertoire.

In developing the prop system for Kun classical dance, Ma Jiaqin places emphasis on the aesthetic and symbolic functions of props in establishing both stylistic distinction and cultural legitimacy. Drawing upon traditional Kun opera costume elements, she systematically recontextualized emblematic stage objects — such as long sleeves, hand fans, and feather plumes (翎子) — as choreographic instruments within Kun classical dance’s movement vocabulary. This deliberate design not only broadened the expressive range of Kun classical dance but also provided a tangible, culturally embedded foundation for its legitimation as a classical dance form. Practitioners such as Tao Yuan (2022) have highlighted how these props became an integral pedagogical tool, enabling students to internalize Kun classical dance’s stylistic markers through embodied practice.

Not limited to the flexible application of Kun opera, Ma demonstrated interdisciplinary creativity in the reinvention of Kun classical dance. She shared, “during a museum visit, I encountered bird-and-insect script (鸟虫篆) and abstracted 108 dynamic motifs from these calligraphic seal designs, later embodying them as choreographic gestures” (Ma, personal communication, 2022). Although the encounter appeared serendipitous, Ma explicitly emphasized that her decision to incorporate

bird-and-insect script into Kun classical dance was intentional. She regarded it as a strategy to transform a unique form of Chinese cultural symbolism into embodied choreography, thereby extending Kun classical dance's semiotic resources and aligning it with broader discourses of cultural heritage preservation. Students involved in the early rehearsals recalled this experimentation as both challenging and inspiring, as it demanded them to reinterpret abstract visual forms through embodied motion (Tao, personal communication, 2022). Thus, the incorporation of bird-and-insect script was not random, but a deliberate act of reinvention that expanded Kun classical dance's aesthetic depth and cultural legitimacy.

In developing Kun classical dance's training system, Ma Jiaqin selectively incorporated Western ballet techniques to enhance bodily control and kinaesthetic precision. However, she carefully confined these techniques to foundational training, deliberately excluding their aesthetic paradigms and formal logic from the performative dimension. As she emphasized, the expressive core of Kun classical dance lies in the traditional Chinese embodied cosmology of *qiyun*, which cannot be replicated by Western movement systems (Ma, personal communication, 2022). This critical hybridity highlights Ma's strategy of selective assimilation, integrating foreign methods without compromising cultural integrity. Dance scholars such as Wilcox (2011) have noted similar strategies in other reinvented traditions in dance field, where external methods are absorbed for functional purposes while local aesthetics remain central.

In 2004, Kun classical dance was formally institutionalized as a four-year undergraduate program at Nanjing University of the Arts. The curriculum comprises sequential modules in functional training and stylistic training. Fieldwork confirms that Kun classical dance has become a stable component of the academy's pedagogy, offering comprehensive instruction in technical form, choreographic aesthetics, and prop-based expression. According to Tao Yuan, Ma's student and currently a dance faculty member at Nanjing Media College, the curriculum unfolds progressively:

In the first two years, students primarily engage in functional training, focusing on coordination, spatial awareness, and bodily control. The third year emphasizes stylistic training, particularly

the manipulation of sleeves, feathers, and fans within choreographic contexts. The final year is devoted to repertory work, where students stage complete Kun classical dance pieces to demonstrate their mastery of form, aesthetics, and expressive depth. (Tao, personal communication, 2022)

This structured pedagogical model not only secures technical proficiency but also deepens students' comprehension of Kun classical dance's aesthetic dimensions. A major milestone in Kun classical dance's academic institutionalization was the publication of *The Undergraduate Textbook on Chinese Kun classical dance* in 2017. This volume systematized the Kun classical dance's aesthetic principles, movement lexicon, prop use, and choreographic logic. As an authoritative pedagogical resource, it plays a central role in codifying Kun classical dance's methodology and legitimizing its position in Chinese dance education and scholarship.

As Althusser (1971) argued, educational institutions function not only as sites of knowledge transmission, but also as ideological state apparatuses that shape subjectivity and cultural identity. In this light, Kun classical dance's pedagogical system constructs a form of national identity that emphasizes continuity with traditional Chinese aesthetics (through Kun opera-derived vocabularies and symbolic scripts), alignment with state cultural policy (through institutional support and curricular standardization), and adaptability to contemporary cultural needs (through selective incorporation of foreign techniques). National identity here is not abstract but embodied in the dancers' bodily training, choreographic repertory, and institutional discourse, which collectively position Kun classical dance as both authentically Chinese and relevant to the nation's modern cultural project.

In general, the reinvention of Kun classical dance illustrates how dance practitioners in contemporary China exercise cultural flexibility — integrating traditional aesthetics, national policy imperatives, and selected foreign techniques to construct a new yet legitimate classical tradition. Echoing Lin's concept of cultural flexibility (2010), Ma Jiaqin's strategic integration of diverse cultural resources not only demonstrates how dance practitioners adapt within institutional contexts but also exemplifies Hobsbawm's notion of the invention of tradition, whereby reinvented

practices acquire new legitimacy and social functions under specific political and cultural agendas.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the flexible reinvention of Chinese classical Kun classical dance in the 21st century, revealing how its formation is situated at the intersection of state-directed cultural policy, localized artistic agency, and transnational aesthetic dynamics. By analysing the processes from conceptual genesis to institutional consolidation, the study demonstrates that Kun classical dance, as a reinvented tradition, embodies a deliberate and strategic negotiation between ideological imperatives and aesthetic innovation.

Firstly, the study underscores the enabling role of national cultural policy since 1949—particularly in the post-1978 era—in providing the institutional framework and discursive legitimacy for the proliferation of new classical dance forms. Policy discourses such as “Making the past serve the present, making foreign things serve China” and “Let a hundred flowers bloom and let a hundred schools of thought contend” functioned not merely as slogans but as guiding principles for cultural production. Within this ideological matrix, Kun classical dance emerged as a locally situated yet nationally recognized form, supported by governmental funding and integrated into higher education curricula. Its reinvention reflects the broader state agenda of diversifying and revitalizing China’s cultural heritage through controlled innovation.

Secondly, the study highlights the centrality of dance practitioner in the reinvention process. While Kun classical dance benefits from top-down support, its development also reflects bottom-up creativity and strategic flexibility. Under the leadership of Ma Jiaqin, the Kun classical dance project mobilized diverse cultural resources, such as Kun opera and Chinese calligraphy, and reconfigured them through codified movement systems, symbolic prop design, and pedagogical formalization. In addition, Ma’s selective integration of ballet training techniques and interdisciplinary translation of visual calligraphy into kinetic motifs exemplifies a choreographic hybridity that resists homogenization while reinforcing cultural specificity. These practices align with Lin Yatin’s

notion of cultural flexibility, revealing how dance practitioners respond adaptively to evolving political, aesthetic and institutional landscapes.

Therefore, the reinvention of Kun classical dance exemplifies the logic of flexible reinvention, whereby tradition is not merely preserved or revived, but strategically reinvented to respond to the cultural, ideological and institutional imperatives of contemporary society. While this research offers important insights into the flexible reinvention of Kun classical dance, several areas warrant further investigation. Future studies could explore the integration of Kun classical dance into Chinese higher education institutions, analysing how dance pedagogy and institutional curricula reflect and shape broader cultural ideologies. Additionally, comparative research on other forms of Chinese classical dance could establish a more comprehensive historical framework, enabling scholars to better understand the multiplicity of strategies involved in the reinvention, codification and dissemination of dance traditions in contemporary China.

Finally, this study also carries broader implications for global dance studies. The case of Kun classical dance demonstrates how national identity can be choreographed through the institutionalization of reinvented traditions, where state cultural policies and artistic practices converge to produce symbolic embodiments of the nation. This invites further cross-cultural inquiry into how different societies mobilize dance as a cultural strategy for negotiating heritage, modernity, and identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

### **Bibliography**

- Chen, S. Y. (2011). 昆舞的形态特征、运动规律及审美特质阐释 [Form Characteristic, Movement Law, and Aesthetic Idiosyncrasy of Kun Dancing]. *Hundred Schools in Art*, 27(3), 187-193.
- Deng, X. P. (1994). 邓小平文选第二卷 [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 2nd version]. People's Publishing House.
- Gilmore, S. (2000). "Doing Culture Work: Negotiating Tradition and Authenticity in Filipino Folk Dance." *Sociological Perspectives*, 43(4), S21-S41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4188815>

- Harvey, D. (1989). *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (eds.). (1993). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes-Freeland, F. (2008). *Embodied Communities: Dance Traditions and Change in Java* (Vol. 2). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Jiang, D. (2008). 中国古典舞发展历程之研究 [A research on the development of the Chinese classical dance] [Doctoral dissertation, China Art Academy]. CNKI, <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFD9908&filename=2008067622.nh>
- Lin, Y. T. (2010). "Choreographing a Flexible Taiwan: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and Taiwan's Changing Identity." In A. Carter & J. O'Shea (eds.), *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 268–278). London: Routledge.
- Ma, J. Q. (2008). 昆舞对昆曲艺术的传承与发展——《昆曲与昆舞》系列之一 [Development of Kun dance upon the Art of the Kun Opera- One of the Serials of Kun and Kun dance]. *Hundred Schools in Art*, 24(6), 170-172.
- Ma, J. Q. (2011). 意韵是中国昆舞的魂脉 [Intention is the soul of Chinese Kunshan dance]. *Art Studies*, 395-398.
- Ma, J. Q. (2019). 中国昆舞本科教材 [Undergraduate textbook of Chinese Kun dance]. China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing Corporation.
- Mao, Z. D. (1991). 毛泽东文集（第3卷） [Collected works of Mao Zedong (Vol. 3)]. People's Publishing House.
- Mao, Z. D. (1996). 毛泽东文集（第5卷） [Collected works of Mao Zedong (Vol. 5)]. People's Publishing House.
- Reed, S. A. (1998). "The Politics and Poetics of Dance." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27(1), 503–532.
- Segal, G. (1992). "China and the Disintegration of the Soviet Union." *Asian Survey*, 32(9), 848–868.
- Song, C. Y. (2024). 数字环境下昆舞发展路径探索 [Exploring the developmental pathways of Kun dance in the digital environment]. *New Chu Culture*, 9, 53-55.

- Wang, K. (2004). 中国舞蹈发展史 [The history of the development of Chinese dance]. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press.
- Wang, Q. (2020). 昆舞“放射性 27 点位”的建构原则及其审美旨趣 [Principles and aesthetic implications in the construction of the “radiant 27-point orientation” in Kun Dance]. *Dance*, 6, 94-96.
- Wilcox, E. (2011). “The Dialectics of Virtuosity: Dance in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–2009.” ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing.
- Wilcox, E. (2019). *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*. California: University of California Press.
- Xie, Y. J. (2023). 高金荣敦煌舞教学体系创建与发展研究 [Study on the establishment and development of Gao Jinrong’s Dunhuang dance teaching system]. *Journal of Lanzhou University of Arts and Science* (Social Science Edition), 39(4), 124-128.
- Yang, J. (2017). 昆舞元素训练下的表演探究——以昆舞作品《情醉三月天》中醉鬼形象为例 [Performance exploration under Kun Dance elements training: A case study of the “drunkard” figure in “Intoxicated in March”]. *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts* (Music and Performing Arts Edition), 3, 154–156.
- Yu, Y. Y. (2016). 昆舞与身韵古典舞中的袖舞比较研究 [A comparative study of sleeve Dance in Kun Dance and Shenyun classical dance]. *Art Education*, 9, 114-115.