

# The Research on the Evolution of the Creation of Manchu Large-scale Dance Works in the New Period

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**Abstract:** Since the new era, we can see that large-scale Manchu dance works have undergone three evolutionary phases. In the 1980s, works like “Pearl Lake” were produced by the cultural roots movement, and these works used mythological narratives to affirm ethnic identity on stage. This can be seen as an important attempt to reconstruct cultural memory through dance performance. Then in the 1990s, because of the “poetic” trend, the focus changed from narrative to lyrical expression. It is worth noting that “Bailu E’niang” pioneered the poetic approach to dance drama, and “Mangshi Fengyun” expanded the form of song-dance poetry in different ways. The 21st century shows cultural refinement and thematic diversity, with dance dramas staging folk customs and works like “Princess of Bohai” exploring the interplay of multiple ethnic cultures, which can provide a full picture of the cultural exchange in this period. In fact, this evolution reflects the creative logic of ethnic minority dance dramas, and it transitions from symbolic construction to spiritual expression.

**Keywords:** Since the new period; Manchu dance drama; Evolution of creative forms

*Online publication:* March 26, 2026

## 1. Introduction

From the late 1970s to the 1980s, Chinese society changed a lot because of the “reform and opening-up” policy. This transformation happened in the economy. Also, it caused a “cultural enlightenment” among intellectuals and artists. When Western modernist trends came to China, the intellectual community felt anxious about its culture. In fact, in the tide of modernization, they should define what “China” means. With “Westernization” as a reference, they asked where their cultural roots were. This anxiety led to a cultural root-seeking trend in the mid-1980s.

## 2. The period of foundation (1980s): The awakening of national consciousness and the creation of “root-seeking”

The “cultural roots-seeking” movement goes beyond political reflection. We examine ethnic history, folk traditions, and myths to find the “cultural strata” that can define national spirit. Minority cultures have preserved myths, rituals, and their lifestyles. They can complement Central Plains Confucian traditions and give artists a mystical realm. Dance dramas usually focus on the “immortal-human romance” metaphor, which means they explore natural laws and national spirit through encounters between youths and goddesses in a way that reflects traditional Chinese aesthetics. The “immortal”

represents irresistible fate. This theme is an artistic condensation of national survival epics and it can construct a distinct stage of “nationality.” Pearl Lake is a milestone in Manchu dance drama because it is inspired by the Manchu legend and the story tells about a young man battling evil forces and protecting his homeland together with a fairy from the Pearl Kingdom, showing the universal theme of “love between mortals and deities.” The choreographer combines shamanic ritual dances with folk yangko. Also, hunting movements are used in character development. Shamanic dances show divine power, while hunting dances establish the warrior ethos. The music, costumes, and stage design create an ancient Manchu world with mystery and it is called “a pearl of ethnic song and dance”. Pearl Lake is the first success of Manchu dance drama from nonexistence. As co-creator Zhao Rongwen summarized: “Respecting tradition and new expression are core principles. Only by grounding ourselves in tradition can ethnic dance dramas survive.” It is worth noting that “Manchu Poetry and Painting” presents festive scenes of weddings, funerals, agricultural life, and other customs, showing the generations in the northeastern region of China where Manchu people lived. “Divine Drum” brings shamanic rituals to the stage. Three works formed the “Root-Seeking Trilogy”: the mythological epic “Pearl Lake,” the folk life portrayal “Manchu Poetry and Painting,” and the primitive faith exploration “Divine Drum.” They can reshape Manchu cultural identity on the stage from different dimensions <sup>[1]</sup>.

The “Root-Seeking” movement of the 1980s was by no means a fleeting phenomenon. For Manchu dance dramas and even China’s ethnic minority dance dramas, it was a crucial “cultural foundation.” It established the cultural subjectivity and methodological awareness in ethnic dance creation, laying the groundwork for formal exploration and cultural roots for subsequent development: the practice of root-seeking initially addressed the identity question of “who we are,” enabling freer modern explorations in post-1990s creations. The “backward-looking” approach advocated by the root-seeking trend, which delved into tradition, was essentially aimed at better “moving forward” to create modern ethnic art, preserve cultural genes, and stimulate innovative potential.

### **3. Exploration and transition period (1990s): The tendency of “poetic drama” and the expansion of form**

Since the new era, the “ontological exploration” of Chinese dance drama art has been a branch of “dance ontological exploration”. In the 1990s, influenced by the “poeticization” trend, Manchu dance dramas entered a critical transition from “narrative representation” to “lyrical expression”. During this period, creators moved beyond plot narration, pursuing dance’s lyrical function and poetic stage imagery. In the 1990s, Chinese dance drama creation began to shift from pursuing plot completeness to formal innovation, giving rise to the genre of “dance poetry”. Poeticized dance dramas, such as Su Shijin’s “Deep in the Tianshan Mountains” and Liu Shiyang’s “Trilogy of Lamentation,” portrayed the human psyche; Shu Qiao’s “Painted Skin” introduced “dance texture” for poetic effects. Ashim’s “color-block structure” and “Mare Visits the Horizon” used a “non-scene” connection. These works can provide a “deplotting” methodology for minority dance dramas where cultural symbols are retained while narrative is reconstructed with poetic thinking so that “cultural expression” and “aesthetic experience” can be unified.

Yu Ping pointed out that dance poetry shows a return to the intrinsic consciousness of dance drama. Under this trend, Manchu dance dramas began to move toward dramatic poeticization. In fact, “Bailu E’niang” (White Deer Mother) is a milestone work of this period. It can elevate “maternal love” from individual emotion to a “symbol of national spirit.” Through this transformation, Manchu culture is changed from a regional symbol into a universal value carrier that can be accepted by different groups. Tradition is reconstructed with a modern spirit so that it can pioneer “poetic expression” in the field of dance drama. By the mid-1990s, Manchu large-scale dance works showed further differentiation. One category continued the narrative style of “Bailu E’ niang”, while another shifted toward “fengqing-style” (local flavor) song-dance poetry forms. This transformation can be attributed to three forces. First, segmented audience aesthetics favor “light narrative, heavy artistic conception”. Second, Manchu culture combines myth and folk customs, which requires diverse forms. Also, the experience from the 1980s works like “Pearl Lake” and “Manchu Poetry and Painting” refined ethnic

dance vocabulary and laid the foundation for song-and-dance poetry creation in the later period<sup>[2]</sup>.

In 1995, Liaoning Dandong Song and Dance Troupe created a dance work called “Mangshi Fengyun” (Mang-style Grace), and this work won a Silver Award at the 3rd Liaoning Provincial Arts Festival. It uses “Mangshi” movement from the traditional dance “Mangshi Kongqi” as the core, and the structure follows the “sacrifice-emotion-ritual” pattern. Also, it combines shamanic rituals with folk traditions, together with the national spirit. This marks that Manchu dance has evolved from “dramatized poetry” to “poetic song and dance”. During the 1990s, Manchu dance works expanded from a mythological narrative of Bailu Eniangthe to a poetic form in Mangshi Fengyun, and this development means that it should transcend the simple “style display” and can achieve “poetic expression of cultural spirit”.

This enriched minority dance drama pathways, elevating Manchu culture from “regional memory” to a vehicle for “universal values” through poetic structures and symbolic reinterpretation.

#### **4. Expanding and deepening period (After 2000): Presentation of “Fengqing” and expansion of themes**

In the 21st century, Manchu grand dance productions entered a new phase. This development builds on the 1980s ethnic identity construction and also the 1990s poetic dramatization. It is worth noting that key features include cultural charm, presentation and thematic broadening. In fact, we observe that creations moved beyond myths or single-ethnic narratives, which can help the audience understand the culture better. Also, choreographic works emphasize organic integration of cultural symbols and emotional threads. At the same time, against a multi-ethnic integration background, we note that themes expanded from Manchu to the Manchu-Tungusic language family. This is expected to support multicultural exchange.

From the late 20th century, China’s dance scene saw a surge in “dance poetry”. This form is free from rigid dramatic logic. It emphasizes artistic conception. Also, it uses poetic structures. This feature is timely for Manchu dance. It can help deepen innovation because the shift moves from myth reliance to poetic extraction of ethnic life, weaving folklore, beliefs, festivals and daily scenes into scenic panoramas that can show ethnic life. Works like “Full of Emotions and Rhythms” and “Full of Rural Sentiments” show this philosophy. Using dance poetry, they create stage narratives. These use prose-like folk scenes. The scenes are linked by imagery and emotional logic. Among them, “Full of Divine Winds” fuses hunting fervor, courtly moods with shamanic beliefs into a spiritual map through chapters like “Chasing Dee” and “The Divine Drum,” and Full of Rural Sentiments uses love as a thread to connect wedding customs and hunting, which imbues it with prose poetry charm. This transformation propels Manchu dance from “dramatized poetry” to “scenic stage performances” that can be suitable for cultural tourism and intangible heritage transmission.

The themes of Manchu dance dramas become more diverse. In history, the Manchu people contacted the Bohai Kingdom and the Mongols, and they also engaged with Han culture, which can support the development of performance art. Then, in the 21st century, the theme expanded to other Manchurian-Tungusic groups. “The Song of Wusuli” portrays the Hezhe life and culture. It blends fishing culture and hunting activities are brought to the stage and this can, in principle, help improve the cultural expression of the ethnic group in modern theater. Through poetic techniques, it can reflect Hezhe virtues. “Princess of Bohai” recreates historical entanglements between the Bohai Kingdom and the Tang Dynasty. It uses a love story between Mohe and Tang envoys, and also incorporates Manchu totems like the “Haidongqing” (Sea Eastern Blue) and hunting dances, while shaman dances are also included to showcase mutual cultural exchange between different nations in the historical context. Props like the “Manchu bow” become emotional symbols. In this way, historical authenticity can be unified with artistic beauty. The Heavenly Sacrifice is set during the Kangxi era’s Manchu-Mongol marriage alliance. It blends both dance vocabularies in the performance context. The work expresses “harmony” through fictional characters’ emotional struggles. Also, Yu Ping noted that, unlike most ethnic dance dramas, The Legend of Tiger Head Peak positioned love within national conflicts between aggression and resistance in a unique way. It is worth noting that this elevated love’s destruction to upholding national dignity<sup>[3]</sup>.

This accurately captures its narrative shift from “aesthetic embodiment of folk sentiments” to “spiritual distillation of historical truth.”

## 5. Conclusion

The Manchu large-scale dance works have experienced evolution from foundation-building to drama-poetry transformation and then to customs expansion. It can be seen that this is not just a change in art form. In fact, it can be seen as a process where the subjectivity of national culture is deepened. In the dialogue between tradition and modernity, this process constructs the stage discourse system of national dance, and it provides a reference paradigm for contemporary inheritance and innovation of the minority culture.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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