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# CHOREOGRAPHING NATIONALISM IN CHINA (1937-1976) THROUGH SHANXI XIAO HUA XI AND PEASANT CULTURE

MENG QING YI



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THROUGH SHANXI XIAO HUA XI AND PEASANT CULTURE

MENG QING YI

THESIS PRESENTED TO QUALIFY FOR A DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS  
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Four years have passed, which felt so long. This was the most challenging and hardworking period of my life. The desire to realize myself was the only motivation that kept me going. During the defense presentation stage, Dr. Patricia Hardwick checked my tens of thousands of words thesis over and over again. Her dense annotations made me feel frustrated, but also let me know that I was not alone in this battle. During the pre-viva and viva stage, I met the most understanding supervisor - Dr. Leng Pohgee. He could always sense the meaning I failed to express due to my limited academic ability and accurately point out what I wanted to say. This always made me feel excited as if I had found a kindred spirit. Besides his strict logical thinking, he was also a friendly and understanding supervisor. He always highly understood his students. If there were another chance to study, I would definitely run to the treasure of a supervisor, Dr. Leng. Dr. Fara Dayana Mohd Jufry pointed out some key issues in my thesis. She was always actively helping me solve problems. I was so lucky to have met these three supervisors. My supervisors were with me, making my research shine.

At the same time, I would also like to express my gratitude to the relatives of Zuo Quan County, who assisted me in my research--Li Mingzhen, Shi Xiangtao, Li Baoding, Wang Xianwei, Wang Rihong, Zhang Jixiang, Li Mingfang, Wang Zhanwen, Wang Jianglan, Li Pengfei, Yuan Lihui and Zhao Wenfang. Shi Xiangtao, the director of the Cultural Bureau of Zuo Quan is a scholar worthy of admiration. His deep love for the culture of Zuo Quan deeply touched me.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my family--Tian Yue, Meng Liansheng, Meng Qingru, Meng Qingyuan, Qiao Jian and Qiao Shike. It is you who have raised me in an environment full of love, making me believe that the world is as loving as our home. Although I have found that it is not the case, I still have your open arms. I am also grateful to Yan Jinfeng. It is you who have given me the strength to explore and face the unknown. You have opened up a new world for me and enabled me to grow. I am also thankful to Ren Nana. No matter whether I am good or not, you have always accepted and respected me, accompanying me through the most difficult times. Besides, I would like to thank my son, Wu Chengwei. You are my weakness and also my armor. It is you who have given me the motivation to strive for progress. It is you who have let me experience the instinctive love of nature. My dear son, in the future life, we will be each other's teachers and grow together.

For me, there is no better time than now. I'm grateful for all the encounters and for myself who has never given up.





## ABSTRACT

Art plays a vital role in the construction of nationalism. This thesis examines Shanxi Xiao Huaxi in Zuo Quan County as part of the national discourse, focusing on how traditional dance contributed to the construction of nationalism through peasant culture during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1949), the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949–1966), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The study has three primary objectives: to explain how Xiao Huaxi became a form of peasant culture, to analyse changes in its choreography, and to explore how its choreography embodies nationalism. To achieve these objectives, the research adopted ethnographic and historical methods, employing content and narrative analysis to evaluate data collected through semi-structured interviews and archival research. The findings reveal that during the three periods examined, Xiao Huaxi was transformed into a representation of peasant culture through negotiation between the state and the people of Zuo Quan County. Choreographic changes were observed in five areas: music, movement, themes, dance design, and aesthetics. Furthermore, the choreography expressed nationalism through both collective imagination and individual participation. From these findings, three conclusions are drawn: (1) tradition acts as an intermediary in the relationship between the state and the people, (2) nationalism constructs authentic cultural identities, and (3) nationalism reversely constructs Orientalism. This study uses a cultural lens to explore societal structures and a societal lens to analyse cultural practices, highlighting how Xiao Huaxi functions both as a cultural text and as a tool for preserving social memory. Thus, the research broadens the scope of dance studies and refines the concept of peasant culture.





## MENKOREOGRAFIKAN NASIONALISME DI CHINA (1937-1976) MELALUI SHANXI XIAO HUA XI DAN BUDAYA PETANI

### ABSTRAK

Seni memainkan peranan penting dalam pembangunan nasionalisme. Tesis ini mengkaji Shanxi Xiao Huaxi di Daerah Zuo Quan sebagai sebahagian daripada wacana nasional, dengan menumpukan perhatian kepada bagaimana tarian tradisional menyumbang kepada pembangunan nasionalisme melalui budaya petani semasa Perang China-Jepun Kedua (1937–1949), penubuhan Republik Rakyat China (1949-1966), dan Revolusi Kebudayaan (1966-1976). Kajian ini mempunyai tiga objektif utama, iaitu menerangkan bagaimana Shanxi Xiao Huaxi menjadi satu bentuk budaya petani, menganalisis perubahan dalam koreografinya, dan meneroka bagaimana koreografi tersebut membangunkan nasionalisme. Bagi mencapai objektif ini, penyelidikan menggunakan kaedah etnografi dan kesejarahan, serta analisis kandungan dan naratif untuk menilai data yang dikumpulkan melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dan penyelidikan arkib. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa semasa tiga tempoh yang dikaji, Shanxi Xiao Huaxi telah diubahsuai menjadi satu representasi budaya petani melalui interaksi antara kerajaan dan penduduk Daerah Zuo Quan. Perubahan dalam koreografi dapat dilihat dalam lima aspek: muzik, gerakan, tema, reka bentuk tarian, dan estetika. Selain itu, koreografi ini juga mengekspresikan nasionalisme melalui kedua-dua nasionalisme imaginasi kolektif dan penyertaan individu. Tiga kesimpulan telah dilakukan melalui dapatan kajian, iaitu (1) pengamalan tradisi berfungsi sebagai perantara dalam hubungan antara negara dan rakyat, (2) nasionalisme membentuk identiti budaya yang autentik, dan (3) nasionalisme secara terbalik membina semula Orientalisme. Kajian ini menggunakan lensa budaya untuk meneroka struktur masyarakat dan menggunakan lensa masyarakat untuk menganalisis amalan budaya, sambil menekankan bagaimana Shanxi Xiao Huaxi berfungsi sebagai kedua-dua satu teks budaya dan peralatan yang memelihara memori sosial. Dengan itu, kajian ini memperluaskan skop pengajian tarian serta memperhalusi konsep budaya petani.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Preface

Tradition is sometimes fixed in the past by the imagination of the public, and is conventionally regarded as a historical form, rather than a dynamic concept that exists synchronously with history (Hughes-Freeland, 2011). However, there is no tradition that does not change. In the context of modernization and globalization, traditions often advance in the direction of nationalism (Cui, 2023). Tradition has become a new cultural form which is quite different from the traditional cultural forms in the past, and has become an invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Range, 2019).

This thesis takes Shanxi folk dance as part of traditional and national discourse in the People's Republic of China, focusing on how traditional folk dance serves the construction of the state's nationalism through the narrative of peasant culture. This thesis investigates the Xiao Huoxi in Zuo Quan County, Shanxi Province, China as a case. This research investigated the evolution of the choreograph of Xiao Huoxi over three periods. First, this research explored how Xiao Huoxi developed into a nationalist performance in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1949). This research





refer to this period as the Second Sino-Japanese War. Japan invaded China from 1937 to 1945. Although 1946 to 1949 is not part of the Second Sino-Japanese War, this period was a time of civil war in China between the Kuomintang represented by Chiang Kaishek and the Communist Party represented by Mao Zedong. This was a struggle for state power between different polities, who had the power to assimilate the state. Civil war is a further interpretation and development of nationalism. The theme of this period was to unite the broadest masses, consistent with the strategy of the Second Sino-Japanese War, so I unified the dance history of these three years into the Second Sino-Japanese War. Then this research explored how the concept of Xiao Huoxi was recreated in the period after the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949 to 1966). Thirdly, this research explored how Xiao Huoxi was restricted in the Cultural Revolutionary period (1966 to 1976).



In this study, the choreography of Xiao Huoxi in these three historical periods is framed under the nationalist expression of peasant culture. In the political and cultural context of China, peasant culture corresponds to the period from the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War to the end of the Cultural Revolution, from 1937 to 1976. The literature and art of this period is called revolutionary literature and art in China (Mu, 2007). From 1937 to 1949, before the founding of the People's Republic of China, China waged an anti-aggression struggle against foreign countries. From the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the proletarian and bourgeois revolution was going on in China. During this revolutionary period, the peasants, as the most important part





of the Chinese population, united the peasants as the way to achieve the goals of the Chinese revolution. Therefore, the adoption of literary and artistic methods in the form of peasant culture that expresses the peasants and performs for them has become a cultural weapon for uniting the peasants and propagating the revolution. With the cooperation of the state and the community, the peasant culture has gone through three choreographic changes of the three periods. This paper explores how the choreography of Xiao Huoxi has changed during these three historical periods, and discusses the larger practical process of how dance is imagined as a nationalist discourse.

In this research, peasant culture is more dynamic and more specific embodiment of traditional self-cultural values, and display and promotion of traditions is a process of nationalist imagination and construction. Traditional folk dances that belonged to particular regions of the past have been reinvented by the power of national discourse, becoming cultural creations divorced from the original environment of the past, and becoming the cultural identity of the whole nation that transcends a particular geographic region. The expression of dance is associated with changes in nationalist discourse, particularly in the construction of history and authenticity, which in turn produce changes and innovations in particular dance cultures. Therefore, dance plays an important role in national identity construction (Hughes-Freeland, 2011). Dance is another expression of the state. The state uses re-choreographed dances as a image of state. The development process of Shanxi Xiao Huoxi is actually constructed by national discourse to constitute the historical events and symbols of national culture.





Through an exploration of the choreography of Shanxi Xiao Huoxi, we can better understand the social changes and the meaning of nationalism in the special revolutionary historical period of the People's Republic of China.

## 1.2 Background research

In September, 2021, I had the opportunity to get to know Ms. Li, a lineage performer of the national intangible culture heritage of the Xiao Huoxi in Zuo Quan County, Shanxi Province. I became her teaching assistant to teach students to learn this long-standing dance cultural. Ms. Li is 80 years old, but she is still full of energy when dancing. She is slender and looks very young. This was not the first time I had come into contact with Shanxi Xiao Huoxi. When I was a graduate student, my tutor Zhao created and adapted this dance form. Zhao also showed her teaching achievements on the national stage, which was highly praised by professors of Beijing Dance Academy, the top dance education institution in China. These learning experiences have allowed me to grasp the traditional culture that has been invented and presented on the national platform. This started to make me wonder what was the original form of tradition that originated in the folk. Why is it that dances, which originated in folklore, are now being trained and performed in university classrooms? How exactly has this process evolved? These puzzlement inspired me to conduct this study.





Dance tradition, as a living culture of oral and personal instruction, will inevitably change in the process of transmission from one generation to another. At the same time, in the process of globalization and modernization, it is impossible for any tradition to develop in isolation. Eric Hobsbawm, a British anthropologist, explained that tradition is not an unchangeable relic handed down from ancient times, but a living creation of contemporary people. Those seemingly ancient traditions that affect our daily life have only a short history. We have always been and have to be in the state of inventing tradition. But in modern times, this kind of invention has become faster and faster (Hobsbawm & Range, 2019).

Tradition is not devoid of historical initiative in the face of external development.

Therefore, tradition does not keep its original appearance without change, as noted by Hobsbawm it will always change, or it is always in the process of change. As a living entity, tradition may lose some of its past elements in the process of development, but at the same time it will be re-invented with some new meanings. Tradition does not exist as a living fossil, but its composition is always in motion. As folklorist Dorothy Noyes explained the traditional is "the transfer of responsibility for a valued practice or performance" (Noyes, 2009, p.68). Therefore, when we talk about tradition, we are encompassing the state of dance within each specific temporal and spatial context. In other words, a traditional dance is constantly evolving dynamically.

This research identified the form of the Xiao Huoxi at the beginning of its transformation as its existing state prior to the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was set





in this period because before this war, Chinese people didn't have a concept of national dance. As noted by Beijing Dance Academy dance teacher Peng Song, in the 1930s, in China, apart from western ballet and modern dance, there were western dances such as tango and waltz, which we now call social dance or ballroom dancing, and we didn't know what Chinese national dance was at all (Gao, 2011). Taking the Xiao Huoxi in Zuo Quan County, which I investigated, as an example, this dance often contained material deemed immoral or thought to offend public decency before the Second Sino-Japanese War. Most Shanxi traditional Xiao Huoxi were used for self-entertainment. So it was not recorded in the official records and was not valued by the social elites before the Second Sino-Japanese War.



Zuo Quan Xiao Huoxi originated from Shanxi province Zuo Quan County. Zuo Quan Xiao Huoxi originated in the early Ming Dynasty, or between the Song Dynasty or the Yuan Dynasty (Around 1300 AD), it was formed in the Qing Dynasty (1636 -1912) and prevailed in Liao County (the old name of Zuo Quan County) at the end of the Qing Dynasty. The Xiao Huoxi in this period was called *Wen She Huo* (文社火), translated into English is *Literary Art Performance*. According to the records of the Chinese folk dances collection--Shanxi Roll, *Wen She Huo* (文社火) originated from the collective activities of ordinary people in rural areas. People would walk on the roads of the village. People used to call this activity *Zou Bai Bing* (走百病), which means to eliminate physical ailments by walking (Chinese Ethnic Folk Literature and Art Integration Compilation Committee, 1993, p.434). Gradually it developed into a form of folk performance. It became a form of performance for the people to celebrate





festivals and entertain themselves. At that time, people regarded the folk dance as a tradition with a negative connotation. For example, in the context of conservative culture in the past, the performance content of the Xiao Huoxi would include the content of married people molesting unmarried people. The purpose is to express that a married people want to have sex with an unmarried people. So, this traditional form that did not appear in the hall of elegance, and often was associated with immorality or even was said to offend public decency. Therefore, it has not been taken seriously by the state, and has always maintained the traditional form.

After entering the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the Communist Party of China regarded art as a weapon to claim political and mobilization of the masses. Under the influence of art policy, traditional *Wen She Huo* (文社火) were reformed and reshaped in China. For example, the performance venue has entered a fixed stage from random mountains or fields, and the performance content has changed from the love life of men and women to the combination with the modernization development of the nation-state. During this period, *Wen She Huo* (文社火) was brought into the track of artistic construction, endowed with positive significance, and was viewed as a positive image. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, Chinese traditional *Wen She Huo* (文社火) was adapted into Xiao Huoxi, and Xiao Huoxi was endowed with fresh connotation of political significance. Emily Wilcox, an American scholar who specializes in Chinese dance, believes that Mao Zedong's Speech at Yan 'an Forum on Literature and Art, published during the Second Sino-Japanese War, conveyed the





expectation of the traditional development direction as a national political level (2018, p.86).

The process of Chinese traditional dance becoming a staged performance is the process of its tradition being invented and transformed. The standard of this process is that the evolution of traditional art needs to adapt to the reality of socialist countries, so that it can serve the political needs of the current country (Wilcox, 2018, p.86). Dance creation in this period closely revolved around the central work of each period during the Second Sino-Japanese War, closely cooperated with the struggle for national independence, and became a weapon to publicize and organize the masses. Three of the four main Anti Japanese military command center led by the Communist Party at that time included Shanxi province. These three bases areas included: Shanxi-Inner Mongolia-Hebei Anti Japanese military command center, Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan Anti Japanese military command center and Shanxi-Suiyuan Anti Japanese military command center. The fourth one is Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Anti Japanese military command center. In this context, Zuo Quan Xiao Huoxi played a role in stimulating the fighting spirit of the soldiers, broke the silence of the past, and became active in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Under the restriction of the national political forces, political discourse transformed and re-invented tradition.

In the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the name of Xiao Huoxi gradually changed from *Wen She Huo* (文社火) to Xiao Huoxi. At that time, Zuo





Quan County was called Liao County. After the local general Zuo Quan was killed during the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War, it was renamed Zuo Quan County to commemorate this general, and Xiao Huoxi was renamed as Zuo Quan Xiao Huoxi. But in the paper, Zuo Quan Xiao Huoxi is all referred to as Xiao Huoxi. From the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, through the founding of the People's Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution, the traditional Xiao Huoxi has presented some new features. Generally speaking, the movements, music, themes, dance design, and the aesthetics of the work have changed greatly during the choreography, lacking the sense of formality of traditional Xiao Huoxi. When the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, *Wen She Huo* (文社火) began to be choreographed into Xiao Huoxi, which subsequently emerged as a nationalist expression of Chinese peasant culture.



Chapters Four, Five and Six of this study are divided into three parts according to the historical stages of the study, corresponding to period of the Second Sino-Japanese War, period of after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and period of Chinese Cultural Revolution respectively. These three chapters are data collection and analysis data on the choreography of Xiao Huoxi. In these three periods, China positioned art from the political dimension and regarded ideology as the unchangeable essence of art. Guided by Mao Zedong's artistic thoughts during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Mao put forward the slogan that art should be combined with workers, peasants and soldiers, art should be created for workers, peasants and soldiers, and art should serve politics (Yi, 2022). Specifically, it is to





make art work for the proletarian politics and the workers, peasants and soldiers, who are the main bodies of its undertakings. This is a generalization of Mao Zedong's artistic thought (Mu, 2007). This thought continued until the end of the Cultural Revolution (Yang, 2018).

Mao Zedong's artistic thoughts in these three historical periods have always been the practical principles guiding China's art. Moreover, in these three historical periods, the Chinese concepts of workers, peasants, soldiers, and people all refer to peasants (Mao, 1991, p.1077-1078; Monica, 1988, p.448). Therefore, the dances of these three periods are all art that expresses peasant culture and performs for peasants. Xiao Huoxi, a peasant cultural form, highlights a unique cultural form that is very different from the traditional form before the Second Sino-Japanese War and the modern culture after China Opening Up to the West after the Cultural Revolution. This unique form of Xiao Huoxi made it possible for China to pursue peasant cultural nationalism in this historical period.

In Chapter Seven, the three research questions of this study are addressed within their corresponding historical periods by first conducting a detailed analysis of each historical stage. These research questions are: Why did choreography of Xiao Huoxi become the form of peasant culture? What changes have occurred in the choreography of Xiao Huoxi? How does the choreography of Xiao Huoxi embody nationalism? The resolution of these three research questions is achieved through data analysis methods including narrative analysis and content analysis. Additionally,





the research findings are discussed in conjunction with a literature review. Finally, the study is summarized based on the research findings.

### 1.3 Problem statement

To illustrate the research problem, this section have been structured into two parts: the emergence of the research problem and the establishment of the research perspective.

The research problem emerged from my observation that Xiao Huoxi evolved from a folk form into official state teaching material. Therefore, I chose Xiao Huoxi as the subject of my study to analyze why and how this dance transitioned from the grassroots to the national level. The establishment of the research perspective arises

from why Xiao Huoxi underwent such changes. During this process, the official records of Xiao Huoxi date back to the start of the Second World War in 1937.

Moreover, the choreography of Xiao Huoxi exhibited characteristics of peasant culture until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. However, following China's

Opening Up to the West after the Cultural Revolution in 1976, due to the influx of

Western culture and changes in political and economic policies, Xiao Huoxi, which embodied peasant culture, lost its voice in discourse. Therefore, this research aim to

explore why, from the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the choreography of Xiao Huoxi presented in the form of peasant

culture.





If the direction of traditional culture is constructed by the state, then I believe that in the field of performing arts, the state's discourse is also infiltrating local traditions, altering the development and inheritance of these traditions. Politics is the fundamental factor guiding the direction of Chinese art (Mu, 2007). However, the phenomenon that inspired this research is the transformation of the Xiao Huoxi from a traditional form into a learning content in university classrooms. This signifies that a dance originally circulating locally for entertainment has become a stylized and standardized national textbook material. Inevitably, this will lead to changes in the performance form, audience participation, or dissemination methods of the Xiao Huoxi. How did these phenomena occur? If we zoom out our research lens further and ponder how traditional dances transitioned from tradition stages to national stages, why traditional cultures were recruited by the state, and how traditional cultures reflect national significance? Therefore, this research have chosen the Xiao Huoxi as research subject to explore these deeper causes.

During the course of this research, it was discovered that the Xiao Huoxi began to transition from the folk to the national level after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 (Wang, 2004). Moreover, the choreography of the Xiao Huoxi exhibited characteristics of peasant culture until the end of the Cultural Revolution. From the 1930s through the 1970s, Chinese society was characterized by a rigid urban–rural divide, which classified citizens as either urban or rural residents (Han, 2007). The vast majority of the population were peasants—agricultural laborers who lived in the countryside and were considered both politically and culturally





distinct from urban elites (Dai, 2012, p.17). In Maoist ideology, the peasantry was not only the social majority but also the revolutionary foundation of the state (Mao, 1991, p.1077-1078). China's hierarchical and rural-centered social structure played a crucial role in shaping how and why folk performance traditions were appropriated by the state.

Therefore, the Second Sino-Japanese War was a national liberation war with peasants as the main force. When peasants, as the main revolutionary force, were constantly praised, peasant culture inevitably infiltrated and transformed national culture in a dominant manner. This infiltration and transformation continued until the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. During this process, the influence of peasant culture on national culture was particularly concentrated and typical in the choreography of the Xiao Huoxi, giving it a unique nationalist character.

Peasant culture became a constitutive and directional element of the Xiao Huoxi during the Second Sino-Japanese War, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and during the Cultural Revolution. As peasants were the primary recipients and participants of the Xiao Huoxi in these three periods, peasants and their culture constantly influenced and constrained the generation, survival, and development path of the Xiao Huoxi. The national status of the Xiao Huoxi is closely related to the political position of peasant culture.





However, with the end of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1976, in order to alleviate the political pressure and cultural monotony brought about by the decade-long Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government shifted the focus of political work from class struggle to socialist modernization (Mu, 2007). The decoupling of politics and art brought about ideological emancipation. As China Opening Up to the West, traditional dances that previously represented feudalism were performed, and Western modern dances that previously represented capitalism also appeared on the stage (Mu, 2007). A diverse cultural landscape became the national artistic narrative. This caused the Xiao Huoxi to lose its dominant discourse power at this historical turning point. Therefore, if the Second Sino-Japanese War was an epoch-making revolution for the Xiao Huoxi to transition from the folk to the national level, then peasant culture was the narrative mode from the beginning of this revolution to the end of the Cultural Revolution in China.

According to the research on the Xiao Huoxi presented in the literature review in Chapter Two, the discussion on the relationship between the Xiao Huoxi and nationalism is relatively weak. Studying the Xiao Huoxi from the perspective of peasant culture helps fill this research gap and deepen the understanding of the Xiao Huoxi from 1937 to 1976. Specifically, in the context of this study, when investigating the phenomenon of changes in the choreography of traditional dances, this study examined from the theoretical perspective of nationalism—this thesis explored why the choreography of the Xiao Huoxi became a nationalist cultural form of peasant culture required by the state during the period from the Second





Sino-Japanese War to the founding of the People's Republic of China and then to the end of the Cultural Revolution in China. This is the research problem of this study.

#### 1.4 Research objectives

The reinvention of tradition has taken place since the Second Sino-Japanese War in China. Since China entered the Second Sino-Japanese War, the country's political and cultural demands have been the main driving force for the change of China's nationalist discourse system. In the evolution of Chinese history, when the national significance of traditional dance is discovered, Chinese cultural elites no longer viewed tradition as a backward, irrational or absurd culture inherited by marginal ethnic groups or lower class people, but as a local property and a national-state property. Particular regional folk dances belonging to the past have been re-invented by the power of the state and people, and become cultural creations that are divorced from the original cultural context of the past. They become the cultural heritage of the whole nation beyond the local area.

This research focuses on how the Shanxi Xiao Huoxi reflects significant social, cultural, and political changes during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the post-founding period of the People's Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution. By extracting Xiao Huoxi from the context of stage performances, it explores how it has become a narrative mode of nationalism. By discussing how and why the national government transformed traditional dances into national discourse, it is demonstrated





that Xiao Huoxi, through this particular transformation, promoted national identity in China and carried and represented the nationalistic aspirations of China. Xiao Huoxi has become a national discourse, highlighting the political significance of dance and possessing immense political, economic, and cultural value. Xiao Huoxi stands as a vivid example of how the state invents tradition through a form of nationalism.

To address the research problem of why Xiao Huoxi has become a form of nationalism, this study has set three specific research objectives, namely:

1. Explain the role of the state and local communities in shaping the choreography of Xiao Huoxi as a form of peasant culture, framed within the theoretical context of nationalism.
2. Analyze the changes in the choreography of Xiao Huoxi over three critical historical periods, considering how these changes reflect broader shifts in political and cultural ideologies.
3. Investigate how the choreography of Xiao Huoxi embodies nationalism, particularly through its role in promoting national identity and aligning with state-sponsored narratives during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the early years of the People's Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution.

### 1.5 Research questions

To achieve the research objectives, the following research questions were prepared:

1. Why did choreography of Xiao Huoxi become the form of peasant culture?





2. What changes have occurred in the choreography of Xiao Huoxi?
3. How does the choreography of Xiao Huoxi embody nationalism?

These research questions guide the research direction of the entire thesis. And they are addressed through the operational methods provided in Chapter three. These three research questions have answers in the three historical periods in this study. Chapters Four, Five, and Six collect and analyze data from three historical periods: the Second Sino-Japanese War, the period after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution, respectively. Chapter Seven addresses these three research questions based on these data.



### 1.6 Study limitations

The line of the Cultural Revolution was based on the class struggle. In order to consolidate the stability of the proletarian regime, the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party Central Committee adopted the *Decision on the Cultural Revolution* (关于文化大革命的決定), which set the goal of breaking the *Four Olds* and establishing the *Four News*. The *Four Olds* are old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits, and the *Four News* are new ideas, new culture, new customs and new habits. For example, the government blindly resorts to burning classical literary works, destroying cultural relics and paintings, and destroying places of interest, believing that these are the *Four Olds*. The state has studied foreign ballet on a large scale and suppressed traditional Chinese folk dance, believing that ballet belongs to the *Four*





*News*. China began to implement the action of breaking the *Four Olds* throughout the society. This action led to the cultural rupture of the traditional Shanxi folk dance.

The *People's Daily of the Chinese National Press* issued the slogan of pushing the revolutionary model opera to the whole country. The specific content is to study Soviet ballet at that time, and four ballets are identified as the main model plays of this period. It emerged as an extreme enthusiasm for people to learn to those dance drama. Fu Hansheng, chairman of the Shanxi Dance Association, recalled:

I was so impressed with myself back then, with our group of young people who were not afraid anything, that I even found it unbelievable. I don't know where that energy came from, how could be in ten days, familiar with all the movements (Ou, 2014, p.281, translated by Meng Qingyi). (Original Chinese: 我对当年的自己, 对我们那群天不怕、地不怕的年轻人, 实在是佩服至极, 甚至觉得不可思议。不知道哪来的那股劲, 怎么会在十几天里, 就熟记了所有的动作).

Even in order to maximize the true reproduction of the model group performance effectiveness, various institutions have also provided various resources and conditions. "According to the then leader Comrade Sun Yuanhui recalls, we had support from all sides and borrow money from Taiyuan Iron and Steel and Taiyuan Heavy Industries (Taiyuan is the capital city of Shanxi), collect discarded ballet shoes from the Central Ballet"(Ou, 2014, p.281). So that the study of the model opera dance drama could proceed smoothly. During this period, popular dance drama works were mainly ballet *Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军) and *White Haired Girl* (白毛女).



The influence of the Chinese Communist Party on the ideology of the masses led to a rise in the people's worship of Mao Zedong. Under the strong influence of the left-leaning political ideology of the time, in order to show their fervent worship and admiration for the leader Chairman Mao, almost all the people of the country were spontaneously dancing the *Zong Zi Wu* (忠字舞) and *Yu Lu Cao* (语录操), that is *Loyal dance* and the *Yu Lu Exercise* (The dance movement represent the saying of Mao Zedong), actively showing their extreme obedience and absolute loyalty to Chairman Mao and the Communist Party. In 1998, the Chinese Communist Party's History Monthly magazine in Fujian, China, published an article called *Recall Yu Lu Exercise*, which described the people during the Cultural Revolution in response to the call of the state to express some of Mao Zedong's words in physical movements, one example of which is:

Corruption and waste are great crimes, this sentence is divided into several beats, embezzlement - hands gathered towards the chest. Waste - hands turned outward from the chest and pushed out. Embezzlement - hands on the top of the head to beat each other. Waste - slap hands down on both legs. A whole set of actions, is to break the quotation sentence into one word after another to replace, one, two, three, four, like playing mute" (Zheng, 1998, p.42, translated by Meng Qingyi). (Original Chinese: 贪污和浪费是极大的犯罪, 这句话分成几个节拍, 贪污--双手向胸前收拢, 浪费--双手从胸前向外翻掌推出, 贪污--双手在头顶相拍. 浪费--双手向两腿拍下。整套动作, 就是把语录句子断成一个个词来代替, 一二三四, 像打哑语似的 )

These body movements have no dance aesthetics, using pictorial ideograms or pictorial expressions. They are designed to move with large amplitude and easy to master. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate the action of the *Yu Lu Exercise* (Source: [https://www.sohu.com/a/230556174\\_197494](https://www.sohu.com/a/230556174_197494)).



**Figure 1.1.**  
*Yu Lu Exercise*



**Figure 1.2.**  
*Yu Lu Exercise*



As mentioned above, China's literary and artistic development has been limited by China's actions to break with old ideas, old cultures, old customs, and old habits, as well as the popularity of *Loyal dance* and the *Yu Lu Exercise*. Under the goal of breaking the *Four Olds*, many artists of traditional folk culture have been treated unfairly. As a result, many folk arts are afraid to continue to be performed in order to avoid being suppressed by the state. Yan Fengying, a famous Chinese opera artist, was imposed on charges that did not exist during the Cultural Revolution. In the end, Yan couldn't stand the pressure from society and chose to commit suicide (Bai, 2000). These actions led to the destruction of most of the written materials related to Xiao Huoxi, and the literary and artistic activities of Xiao Huoxi were also severely restricted by politics during this period. Information about the Xiao Huoxi of this period can only be obtained by oral means. This will result in information that tends to be subjective and less comprehensive.

### 1.7 Theoretical framework

No qualitative study begins from pure observation; rather, all research is guided by a conceptual lens grounded in theory and method (Schwandt, 2014). This study explores how the choreography of Xiao Huoxi was reimagined and reinvented during key revolutionary periods in China to reflect a national identity. To frame this exploration, the theoretical foundation of this research is drawn from Benedict Anderson's concept of nationalism as articulated in his influential work *Imagined Communities* (2016).

Anderson defines a nation as an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2016, p.6). According to Anderson, nationalism is not an ancient or eternal force, but a modern social construct that arises when individuals begin to imagine themselves as part of a shared national identity. This shared imagination is enabled by what he calls print capitalism—the dissemination of texts and cultural symbols that foster collective consciousness across dispersed communities (Anderson, 2016, p.6–7).

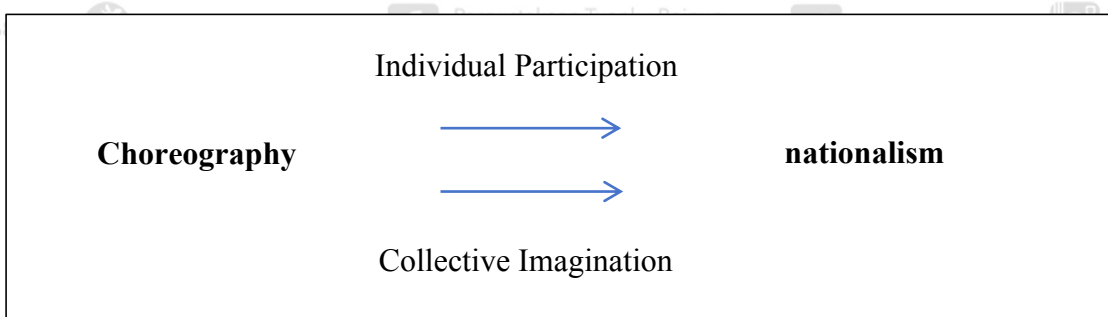
Two theoretical principles from Anderson’s framework underpin this study:

**Collective Imagination:** Nations exist because people imagine themselves as part of a greater whole. This collective imagining is achieved through shared narratives, rituals, and symbols (Anderson, 2016, p.6–7). In this study, the Xiao Huoxi acts as a cultural artifact through which the collective imagination of the Chinese nation was staged and reinforced across generations, particularly through its transformation into a performative symbol of peasant nationalism.

**Individual Participation:** While collective imagination is central, Anderson also emphasizes the role of individual actors in enacting nationalism. Individuals internalize, reinterpret, and perform nationalist narratives in personal and localized ways (Anderson, 2016, p.145–149). In this study, the personal experiences of performers, choreographers, and peasants who engaged in Xiao Huoxi offer rich insight into how nationalism was not only imposed from above but also shaped from below.

This theoretical lens allows us to interpret Xiao Huoxi not just as an artistic or folk tradition, but as a living mechanism of national identity construction. Dance becomes both a medium and a message—a form through which imagined national unity is embodied, narrated, and ritualized. The framework also recognizes the tension between state-driven nationalist narratives and individual acts of interpretation and resistance, acknowledging the dual nature of national culture as both institutional and personal. This framework provides a cohesive theoretical foundation to analyze both top-down and bottom-up processes in choreographic nationalism.

**Figure 1.3**  
*Theoretical Framework*



## 1.8 Summary

This thesis positions Xiao Huoxi as a hybrid performance form that transitioned from folk opera to choreographed dance, allowing it to serve as both a cultural artifact and a political tool of nationalist expression during revolutionary China.



Chapter One briefly introduces the historical stages spanning from the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, through the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, within which this research is conducted. Additionally, it introduces the subject of this study: the Xiao Huoxi of Shanxi Province, which was previously known as *Wen She Huo* (文社火) before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Then, this section also elucidates the research background. The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War elevated *Wen She Huo* (文社火), a traditional dance previously overlooked by China, to a position of prominence in Chinese political discourse. *Wen She Huo* (文社火) began to serve as a cultural tool in China, undergoing a nationalist transformation narrative rooted in peasant culture. It evolved into Xiao Huoxi, a form of peasant culture that represented and was performed for peasants. From then on, Xiao Huoxi became a vehicle of nationalist discourse. Throughout the founding of the People's Republic of China and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, Xiao Huoxi served as a cultural means to unite the peasant majority in China, contributing to China's victories from the onset of the external war in 1937 to the internal class revolution of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

Next, building on these historical facts, this chapter poses the problem of why the choreography of Xiao Huoxi evolved into a nationalist form of peasant culture during these three historical periods. This constitutes the research problem of this study.





Finally, to address this research problem, this chapter outlines three specific research objectives and corresponding research questions. Concurrently, a theoretical framework on nationalism is also included in this chapter. Within it, collective imagination and individual participation, as two theoretical principles of nationalism, serve as the scaffolding for resolving research questions and achieving research objectives.

