

STUDY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC SONG AND DANCE COSTUME DESIGN IN GUANGXI, CHINA

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Abstract

China, a nation celebrated for its cultural diversity, presents a rich mosaic of dance traditions thriving among its diverse ethnic communities. Within this cultural tapestry, the discipline of costume design for ethnic musical theaters assumes a pivotal role, shaping the essence of stage artistry. Despite its profound importance, a conspicuous void exists in theoretical research within this domain. This study embarked on a multifaceted exploration with three core objectives including: 1) Exploring Evolution and Socio-Cultural Dynamics: The study endeavored to unravel the correlation between the evolving landscape of stage costume design for ethnic minorities in Guangxi and the concurrent socio-cultural developments spanning from 1949 to 2020. 2) In-Depth Analysis of Design Methods and Procedures: It aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis, shedding light on the intricate methods and procedures that underlie the art of stage costume design for ethnic minorities in Guangxi. 3) Creation of Distinctive and Contemporary Stage Attire: The research extended its reach by crafting distinctive and contemporary stage costumes tailor-made for the opera “The Great Han Sea Road,” the dance “Feather People,” and the song and dance performance “Night in Guilin”

The study employed a qualitative approach, analyzing interview content using descriptive statistics and stratified multiple regression analysis. Data was meticulously gathered and structured, drawing from insights from 8 performance groups, 20 practitioner surveys, and 8 interviews. An additional 30 audience surveys contributed to validating the research findings, affirming their consistency and significance. The design methodology initially evolved focusing on enhancing traditional attire, introducing innovations in color and style, and ultimately striving to harmonize visual aesthetics with tradition.

The study revealed a discernible pattern in the development of ethnic minority stage costumes in Guangxi during the period from 1949 to 2020, characterized by a cyclic journey of traditional innovation and return to tradition (e.g., elements of style, color, and fabric), mirroring broader societal transformations

in China. This research provided a multifaceted exploration into the intricate world of ethnic minority stage costume design in Guangxi, elucidating its evolution, cultural resonance, and practical applications within the performing arts. The findings have fostered innovative practices within the realm of stage costume design, manifesting prominently in the opera "The Great Han Sea Road," the dance "Feather People," and the song and dance spectacle "Night in Guilin"

Keywords: Stage costume design, Musical Theater, Ethnicity, Symbols

Introduction

Song and dance, as a quintessential form of human artistic expression, encapsulate a profound amalgamation of emotions and narratives through the medium of sound and body language. This artistic form, deeply rooted in human culture, has blossomed into a rich tapestry of diverse folk-dance traditions. These traditions are marked by variations in content, form, rhythm, and style, illuminating the human experience and giving rise to musical theater costumes, which carve a distinct path in the evolution of song and dance.

The early architects of song and dance costume design were often graduates of art institutions or skilled tailors with expertise in costume craftsmanship. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that institutions such as the Shanghai Theater Academy and the Central Academy of Drama established stage art programs to nurture talent in costume design. However, it was not until 2002 that the Beijing Dance Academy initiated a specialized stage costume design program, primarily focusing on the needs of dance performance costume design (Zhang & Han, 2008). In the daily lives and work of costume designers, the focus primarily centered on the intricacies of design itself, with limited emphasis on theoretical research, especially in the context of stage costume design for ethnic minority musical theaters.

The significance of theoretical research in the realm of stage clothing design cannot be overstated. While previous studies have adequately covered the domains of stage costume design and ethnic costume research individually, a

notable gap exists in the exploration of the developmental characteristics governing stage costume design rules for Guangxi ethnic-themed musical theaters. This research aims to address this gap by delving into the intricacies of theoretical inquiry.

The scope of this study encompasses Guangxi ethnic-themed musical theaters since the inception of the People's Republic of China. On one hand, we meticulously scrutinize and research productions from various performance groups and theaters across all levels. On the other hand, we conduct regional assessments, meticulously organizing traditional folk and customary indigenous performances to the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, with an unwavering commitment to precision and comprehensiveness in our research endeavors. The overarching objective is to unveil the developmental characteristics underpinning stage costume design rules in Guangxi. Our inquiry, primarily spanning the period from 1949 to 2020, hinges on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout our research journey.

The study seeks to unravel the distinctive features, design methodologies, and guiding intrinsic principles to stage costume design within this context. It delves into the seamless integration of visual elements from ethnic costumes into stage costume design and explores the harmonization of these two domains. Through an exhaustive exploration of style, color, and fabric, our research elucidates the evolutionary trajectory, from the initial emphasis on realism to mid-stage innovations and the eventual return to traditional clothing designs in the later stages.

In conclusion, this research endeavor strives to bridge the gap in theoretical understanding within the domain of stage costume design for Guangxi ethnic-themed musical theaters. By exploring the nuanced development of design principles, it contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of artistic expression, cultural heritage, and visual aesthetics in the realm of song and dance.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship between the developmental laws of stage clothing design for ethnic minorities in Guangxi and social development from 1949 to 2020.

2. To analyze the methods and procedures of stage clothing design for ethnic minorities in Guangxi.

3. To design distinctive and contemporary stage costumes for the opera “The Great Han Sea Road,” the dance “Feather People,” and the song and dance evening “Night in Guilin.”

Literature Review

Development Characteristics

The studies reviewed in this research employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Preliminary findings suggest that the development of Guangxi ethnic dance costume design can be categorized into three stages: the early realistic style stage, the mid-term innovative trial stage, and the later stage of returning to tradition. These stages reflect the close relationship between costume design and social development, as well as cultural exchange.

Styles

A prominent feature of Guangxi dance costume design from the early to middle and late stages derived from everyday clothing, particularly evident in early dance costumes that closely adhere to traditional styles. Norville, a Master of Dance drama, once remarked, “As long as the national characteristics are not distorted and overall beauty is maintained, it is excellent and deserves the highest praise. If we do not beautify it with techniques, if the costume style is not deviated at all, it is rigidly copied, the scene presented can only be very flat and not worth our public attention.” When designing ethnic dance costumes, it is essential to faithfully represent ethnic styles in daily life while infusing artistic

elements. Based on ethnic characteristics, under the premise of respecting ethnic culture, costumes should be redesigned to align with the different themes and emotions of each performance. For example, in the early costume design of the dance “Lamu Song” (see Figure 1), Mr. Yuan Fuzhi, a costume designer from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Song and Dance Troupe, emphasized the importance of showcasing dynamic line beauty and human beauty in the dance while meeting the performance requirements of the dancers. He emphasized that it was not necessary to replicate the style exactly as seen in daily life. In designing the “Lamu Song” dance costume, he applied subjective treatment to shape the actors’ image in the dance based on the traditional costume of Baikuyao. He retained the traditional top with a diagonal waist and white pants in the style of riding trousers, while discarding the original headscarf and leggings. This approach allowed the performers to highlight the beauty of their lines and bodies, leading to great success and unanimous praise (Yuan, 1987).



Figure 1 Dance “Lamu Song”

Source: Guangxi Opera and Dance Drama Theater

The representative work of the mid-term stage is primarily exemplified by the Zhuang dance “Early Spring in Zhuangxiang” (Figure 2), featuring costumes in both men’s and women’s styles. The men’s attire consists of a cross-collar short top and shorts, while the women’s ensemble includes a diagonal collar top

and a medium-length skirt. These costumes, while enhancing the stage effect, draw inspiration from Zhuang costumes in the Chongzuo region. However, they exaggerate the colors, presenting a more vivid and striking appearance. This stage marks a departure from the early costume design, incorporating ethnic cultural symbols into dance costumes while retaining a traditional form.



Figure 2 Dance “Early Spring in Zhuangxiang”

Source: Guangxi Opera and Dance Drama Theater



Figure 3 Musical “Kapok Red”

Source: Author

The representative work of the late period is the musical “Kapok Red” (Figure 3). This period marks a stage of exploration and trial, as designs begin to revert to traditional styles while incorporating modern elements and techniques in costume details. Although the overall flavor is more traditional than the mid-term costume design, it follows traditional aesthetic principles while integrating modern design concepts. The design techniques in this period are more mature, reflecting a blend of tradition and modernity.

Color

The color development of Guangxi song and dance costumes also has distinct characteristics influenced by design concepts of different periods. The characteristics presented by color throughout the development process are consistent with the development of social trends and the exchange and integration of foreign cultures.

The color of the early song and dance costumes mainly refers to the colors of ethnic costumes in life, such as the costume colors of male and female performers in “Jianshui River Love Song”, which are basically consistent with the colors of life costumes. The overall effect is more rustic and lifelike, with exaggerated use of color in local details. In the development process, designers gradually began to artistically process the colors of dance costumes. For example, when Mr. Yuan Fuzhi designed the costumes for “Lusheng Dance” in 1956, in order to make the color mood of the costumes consistent with the mood of the dance work, he changed the blue-black color of the traditional costume to color, thus achieving the consistency of the costume with the work mood.

The representative work of the mid-term is mainly the Miao dance work “Ning” created by Guangxi Song and Dance Theatre in 1980 (Figure 4). With societal development, people’s vision and creation are more open, and the color of stage costumes is richer than in the early days, no longer completely copying life, but more about integrating the emotion of color into costume design. At the same time, the character is shaped by contrasting colors. Take “Ning” as an example, the dark color in the costume is greatly reduced, and light color is used in large areas. A lot of warm and festive red is used in the costumes. This also reflects the influence of social development on people’s aesthetic orientation during this period.



Figure 4 Dance “Ning”
Source: Guangxi Opera and
Dance Drama Theater



Figure 5 Dance Drama “Liu Sanjie”
Source: Jiangbo Xie

In the later period, with more modern design concepts involved, designers carry more personal and modern factors when designing costumes. In the costume design of the dance drama “Liu Sanjie”, the overall effect is more implicit and introverted. The designer’s grasp of the costume hue combines the costume with the overall stage space design while shaping the characters, and the language of costume color plays a more significant role. It pursues the introverted aesthetic interest of ethnicity in development, abstracts the ethnic decorative flavor, presents the ethnic connotation in a modern way, and designs with more up-to-date developments.

Fabric

Another significant element in the development of Guangxi’s song and dance costume design is fabric. The evolution of fabric is closely tied to advancements in technology and cultural significance. Earlier costume designs for song and dance performances were restricted by textile technology, often utilizing traditional hand-woven cotton or linen materials, lacking elasticity, with fairly simple and rustic effects. Post-reform and opening up, alongside the development of technology and people’s mindsets, and the exchange of different cultures, the materials used in costumes have become incredibly diverse, with a plethora of synthetic fibers and varied effects emerging. The utilization of elements has also significantly differed, for instance, the technique used for patterns previously was largely embroidery or brocade. With updated technology, heat transfer, silk screen printing, machine embroidery, digital printing, and more are now extensively applied in stage costumes. The overall effect is colorful and artistic, a considerable change from the past. In the 1980s, costumes for the Douli Dance extensively incorporated chiffon, satin, and silk-screen printing techniques (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Dance “Douli Dance”

Source: Guangxi Opera and Dance
Drama Theater



Figure 7 Dance “Hibiscus Flower”

Source: Author

Later, the texture pursued in fabric has reverted back to traditional aesthetics. The difference lies in the fact that modern fabric retains traditional texture but incorporates more advanced technology. Traditional cotton and linen materials lack elasticity, and many dance movements were restricted by this. However, the materials produced now have avoided these issues, allowing for more choice according to the requirements of movements. Additionally, they can produce cotton and linen fabrics with varying elasticity, meeting the needs of song and dance costume creation. Entering the 21st century, high-tech materials like sound, light, and electricity have begun to be used in stage costume design, significantly changing the form of costumes. In the costume design for the dance “Hibiscus Flower” during the concert “China-ASEAN Dialogue 25th Anniversary” (Figure 7), designers combined lighting techniques with the costumes, achieving a cross-disciplinary integration. Overall, the early stages were realistic and rustic, while the later stages were modern and trendy. This evolution is inextricably linked with the development of societal technology and aesthetics. In recent years, some directors and costume designers have begun to seek realism in their creations, striving for original and simplistic effects. This trend aligns with the current society’s focus on and promotion of intangible cultural heritage.

Research methodology

1. Research methods

This study utilized literature research and interviews as the primary research tools for qualitative research. The interview content was analyzed using descriptive statistics and stratified multiple regression analysis. The main body of the study is divided into three parts. The first part involves searching for publications and other literature related to stage costumes in Guangxi. The second part comprises interviews with frontline practitioners such as fashion designers, fashion producers, directors, and dancers in the Zhuang region. The third part involves interviews with experts, scholars, and audiences engaged in research related to ethnic clothing in the Zhuang region.

2. Research process

The research process began with determining the background of the research question and clarifying the research objectives. Theories and relevant literature were then researched and analyzed, and survey research was used to develop the research from these foundations. Interview-style surveys were conducted to collect data and conduct analytical research. Researchers compiled relevant interview questions in three parts: the first part addressed personal information such as gender, age, and employment time. The second part focused on the understanding of stage costumes in Guangxi. The third part primarily discussed the understanding of the development and changes of stage costumes in Guangxi, as well as the impact of these changes. Based on the collected data, researchers conducted analysis and obtained research results.

3. Data collection

The data for this project was sourced from various literature, including publications related to Guangxi stage costumes, as well as pictorials, pictures, and other relevant materials. Additionally, physical data was obtained from various museums and exhibition halls. Furthermore, data was gathered through interviews with relevant individuals and from survey questionnaires. The study involved 8 interviews with relevant workers and the distribution of 50 survey questionnaires

to other personnel. After six months, the feedback collected was analyzed and organized.

4. Data analysis

The researchers employed a qualitative approach, analyzing interview content using descriptive statistics and stratified multiple regression analysis to interpret the findings of the study on the development of ethnic song and dance costume design in Guangxi, China. This involved calculating measures such as mean, median, and standard deviation to summarize the data collected from interviews, surveys, and literature sources related to Guangxi's ethnic song and dance costume design. The data was then organized and presented to identify trends and patterns in the development of these costumes, considering traditional and modern influences.

Research results and Suggestions

Distinctive Nature of Song and Dance Costume Design: Song and dance costume design, owing to its unique functionality and usage context, diverged significantly from everyday clothing. Its visual impact must be purposefully exaggerated to achieve desired performance effects. Techniques such as color contrast and other enhancements should be employed judiciously to effectively portray characters and amplify the overall aesthetic experience.

Leveraging Technological Advancements: Song and dance costume design should embrace the opportunities presented by technological advancements. Modern design can benefit from innovations in fabric selection and the application of technology, enhancing the aesthetics and contemporary appeal of the work. By incorporating these modern elements, designers could create costumes that were not only visually captivating but also reflective of contemporary sensibilities.

Synchronization with Social and Cultural Developments: Song and dance costume design was intricately intertwined with the broader currents of social, cultural, and ideological evolution. It should align with the prevailing ideologies and aesthetics of the times while also paying due consideration to the historical

backdrop. A thoughtful fusion of modernity and tradition could yield costumes that resonate with audiences and remain relevant in a dynamic cultural landscape.

Research-Based Design Practice: Effective song and dance costume design necessitated thorough preliminary research. Researchers should base their design practices on the insights and conclusions derived from previous research. This iterative process ensured that the costumes were not only artistically appealing but also grounded in a well-informed understanding of cultural nuances and historical context.

In summary, song and dance costume design was a specialized field that demands a careful balance of artistic creativity, technological innovation, and cultural sensitivity. By acknowledging the distinctiveness of this design discipline and leveraging modern design elements, designers could create costumes that captivate audiences, reflect the spirit of the times, and contribute to the dynamic cultural exchange and integration inherent in the world of performing arts.

Design Practice Application

Based on the research findings above, the theories obtained were applied in the work design. The focus was primarily on the costume design of three works created during the doctorate: the opera “The Great Han Sea Road,” the dance “Feather People,” and the song and dance evening “Night in Guilin.”

When designing the performance costumes for the opera “The Great Han Sea Road,” the story background was set in the Han Dynasty. Some actors played the roles of Han Dynasty envoys, while others portrayed the ancestors of Guangxi in the Han Dynasty. Abundant literature was available for reference on the costumes of Han Dynasty envoys, but there was no material on the costumes of the Zhuang ancestors. As it was a long time ago, and Guangxi is located in a remote area, there was no directly relevant costume information related to Guangxi’s ancestors, only some fragmented descriptive records in the literature. Therefore, during the creation, a large amount of literature and data, as well as museum exhibitions, were consulted to indirectly understand and restore the

costumes of that time, then redesign and design suitable performance costumes for the opera “The Great Han Sea Road.” According to the records in “Strategies of the Warring States, Zhao Strategy,” and “Huainanzi, Original Dao Training,” it can be seen that the Zhuang ancestors of that period had their hair loose or cut, had tattoos, and wore clothes with their left arm exposed. These costume features of the time served as important reference bases in the design process.

Based on the organization and research of the above literature, elements such as chignon, barefoot, left-exposed clothing, loose hair, tattoos, and bird feather headdresses were incorporated into the design for the opera “The Great Han Sea Road.” The chignon, barefoot, and left-exposed clothing were mainly used in the costumes of the Guangxi ancestor extras, giving them the characteristics of Guangxi ancestors. On this basis, traditional fabrics were used to ensure the cultural rigor and stage effect of the costumes (Figure 8). The bird feather headdress element, due to its strong decorative nature and ability to highlight certain status, was used in the design of the tribal leader’s headwear. In the costume design of other roles, relevant elements were also integrated, such as in the costume design of the male lead, which included chignon, feather headdress, simulated animal teeth decoration, bronze drum frog pattern, and feather people pattern decoration. Materials such as bamboo chips and hemp thread were also used, shaping the simplicity and primitiveness of the costume (Figure 9), (Figure 10).



Figure 8 “The Great Han Sea Road” Source: Author



Figure 9 “The Great Han Sea Road” Costume Source: Author



Figure 10 “The Great Han Sea Road” Costume Source: Author

In designing costumes for the female group dance “Feather People,” the director expressed a desire to showcase the grace of the dance while avoiding any sense of primitiveness. The approach taken was to maintain the traditional visual image while integrating modern fabrics and techniques to create a soft and beautiful visual effect akin to a dancing fairy. According to the record in the “Ancient Bronze Drum Decorative Art” published by the Cultural Relics Publishing House in 2018, the Feather People dance is described in detail, providing valuable insights into the original dress and best dress of the Feather People” (Wu, Luo, & Cai, 2018). The dance of the Feather People found in the Luo Bo Bay Han tomb, identified as M1:10 drum waist square, involves 2-3 people in a group wearing large feather headdresses with four spear-shaped feather cards on top, wing-shaped feather decorations on the bun, and a short front and long back egret tail skirt (Figure 11). The Feather People dance in the bronze drum decoration was one of the early dance images of the Guangxi ancestors that could be referenced.

During the preliminary research and literature review phase, a visit to the Bronze Drum Exhibition Hall at the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Museum provided further insights into the bronze drums related to the Feather People image. Two symbols of the Feather People image were summarized: the feather headdress and the skirt’s piece cutting. The overall color of the costumes was determined to be white, chosen for its light, pure, and uplifting qualities. Pheasant tail feathers and white goose feathers were used to make headdresses for the actors, consistent with the traditional Feather People image. The fabric chosen for the costumes was white chiffon, known for its softness and compatibility with the desired portrayal of the Feather People. For the skirt part, overlapping piece-cut skirt pieces were used without sewing them together, creating a richer volume and layers compared to traditional Feather People group pieces. The back of the upper body was covered with skin-colored stretch tulle, decorated with rhinestones forming geometric patterns reminiscent of the drum patterns. The use of rhinestone material added a modern touch while retaining the traditional charm, achieving a graceful image of the Feather People dancer. (Figure 12).



Figure 11 Luo Bo Bay Han Tomb M1:
10 Bronze Drum
Source: Author



Figure 12 Group Dance “Feather
People”
Source: Author

In designing the costumes for the performers of “Night in Guilin,” the director requested that the costumes retain traditional cultural charm while also possessing a dignified visual effect that aligns with modern dressing habits and aesthetics. The chosen color was the traditional, rational blue-black color, made from multiple dyes of traditional blue dye, which is used in the vast majority of Zhuang areas and is highly representative. The fabric selected was modern machine-woven cotton and linen, closely matching the texture of traditional hand-woven cotton cloth to ensure the visual texture of traditional costumes. Lake blue linen fabric was used for the trims of the neckline and cuffs to enhance the color layers of the costume and prevent it from appearing dull. For the decoration of the neckline and cuffs, modern machine-woven synthetic silk Zhuang brocade was used. This material is more exquisite in pattern, moderate in thickness, and high in gloss compared to traditional Zhuang brocade, making it suitable for use in costume decorations. The edges of the costume were finished with powder-colored edging made of synthetic silk material, adding a feminine touch. The skirt was made from black linen pleated fabric, visually identical to traditional pleated skirts. In terms of style, the design drew inspiration from Zhuang costumes of the Napo region, featuring separate tops and bottoms with a waist-cinching top, adding grace to the actress’s appearance (Figure 13). The sleeves were cut separately from the body, then attached, instead of using the traditional method

of cutting the body and sleeves together. This approach was chosen to avoid excessive pleating in the underarm part of the top, ensuring a more fitted look that aligns with modern dressing habits and performance requirements. Additionally, the top was slightly shorter than daily Zhuang women's clothing, elevating the waistline to create a more perfect and dignified proportion for the actress (Figure 14).



Figure 13 Napo Zhuang Women's Clothing
Source: Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Local History Compilation Committee



Figure 14 Music and Dance Show
"Night in Guilin"
Source: Author

Conclusions

This article represents the culmination of an extensive research effort into the intricate realm of ethnic song and dance costume design in Guangxi. While significant progress has been made, it is important to recognize that there are ongoing areas of exploration and refinement within this multifaceted field.

One significant aspect revealed through this research is the nuanced nature of ethnic song and dance costume design. It is influenced by a myriad of factors, including regional and temporal considerations, as well as the interplay of individual creative expression and broader societal trends. The dynamic and ever-

evolving nature of these influences underscores the complexity of this creative endeavor.

A discernible trend that has emerged in recent years is the resurgence of traditional styles within costume design. This resurgence reflects the cyclical nature of cultural evolution and has been supported by the meticulous organization of data, extensive survey questionnaires, and insightful interviews conducted throughout the research process. These findings encapsulate the collective perspectives of both seasoned designers and discerning audiences.

Furthermore, this research has led to the practical creation of various design works, providing tangible examples of the principles and insights gleaned from the study. These design works serve as a testament to the practical applicability of the research findings and offer inspiration for designers working in the dynamic field of Guangxi song and dance costume design.

Looking ahead, there is a steadfast commitment to advancing our understanding of song and dance costume design in Guangxi. This entails a dedication to conducting deeper and more comprehensive research that not only enriches our knowledge but also ensures the continued vibrancy and cultural relevance of this captivating art form. Through ongoing exploration and innovation, we aim to contribute meaningfully to the preservation and evolution of Guangxi's rich heritage of song and dance costume design.

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