

Report on Chinese Folk Dance at Beijing Dance Academy Summer 2016

Trip to Beijing

At the end of July, I went to the dream place for dancers in China, the prestigious Beijing Dance Academy, for the fourth time. This time, I was taking Advanced Chinese Folk / Ethnic Dance course. It was an intensive three weeks' course learning three different folk or ethnic dances from Southwest of China: Yi, Miao and Zhuang; we learnt one style within one week with an assessment / performance at the end of each week. I was very honoured to be awarded [Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund](#) (LUTSF) for the second time after 6 years since the first time, who supported me for my flight to Beijing.

Summer in Beijing was not particularly pleasant. It was hot, humid and infamously smoggy. So vigorous dancing in such climate was fairly challenging and made me tired quickly especially when I had not danced much for a while, but simultaneously this kind of training boosted my stamina and built fitness effectively.

Background Information

China is a remarkably diverse and multicultural country with official 56 ethnic groups residing in the country, each of which has distinctive costumes, languages, customs, music and arts as well as dance. Over 90% of population in China is Han ethnic and the rest 10% is 55 ethnic minority groups including Mongolian, Uyghur, Tibetan, Korean, Yi, Zhuang,

Miao, Bai, Dai and etc. Ethnic minorities are renowned for their affinity and flair for dance and music, which is an eminent part of their daily life.

56 ethnic groups in their traditional costumes



Yi, Miao and Zhuang, these three ethnic groups, mainly live in the provinces of Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangxi Zhuang Ethnic Autonomous Region in China. The three dance styles share similarity in rhythmic and energetic characteristics whilst they show differences in their movements, dynamics and quality. Comparing to other more celebrated ethnic dance in China including Mongolian, Uyghur, Tibetan, Dai and Korean, the dances from these three groups are less known and less popularised but are getting increasing interest from dance artists and mass population.

Chinese Folk Dance Training

1. Yi Ethnic Dance

One of China's oldest ethnic groups, the Yi people have a history of some 3,000 years. Today, they live primarily in China's southern provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. Their affinity for song and dance is legendary.

Yi Ethnic Female Costumes







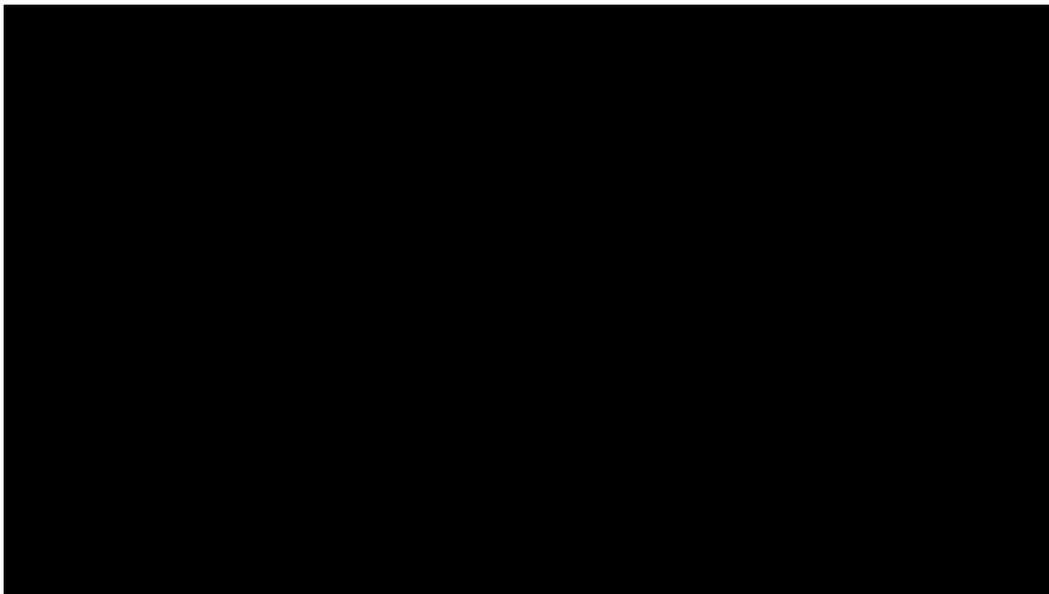
As suggested by colorful dance movements, the Yi seize occasion to “dance out” their feelings in everyday life. Choreographed performance pieces depicting their style are often set in the lush hills of Yunnan, and are known for vibrant rhythms and energy. Combinations of threes and sixes characterize Yi ethnic dance. Some basic movements include “Three Steps and a Pause,” “Three Flips Three Spins,” “Six Stepping Flips to Form a Flower,” and “Half Tumble Half Turn.”

Many movements are taken from daily life. The “Beating Buckwheat Step” was inspired by the annual harvest. It is characterized by taking three steps forward and one step

back while moving in circles. While the feet are busy stepping, the upper body sways gently left and right, creating a distinctively Yi rhythm.

In this training course, we learnt six different styles and routines including Ma An Shan Beating Song, Hua Yao Yi, Left Foot, Hua Luo Adagio, Hua Luo Allegro, Nan Jian Beating Song.

Here is the video for [Highlights of Yi Ethnic Dance](#)



Ma An Shan Beating Song

Beating Song or Da Ge is one of main styles from Yi ethnic dance; Yi people do the dance mainly for celebrating occasions like weddings and festivals. This particular style is from Ma An Shan area in Yunnan Province, Southwest of China. It is very energetic and rhythmic with dancers stamping, clapping and doing fast footwork.

Hua Yao Yi

The signature attributes for this style are constant clapping and rapid movements. Dancers clap in an anticlockwise

shape with hands in a cross shape while dancing in a quick tempo and change directions swiftly either side to side, forward and back or in a circle.

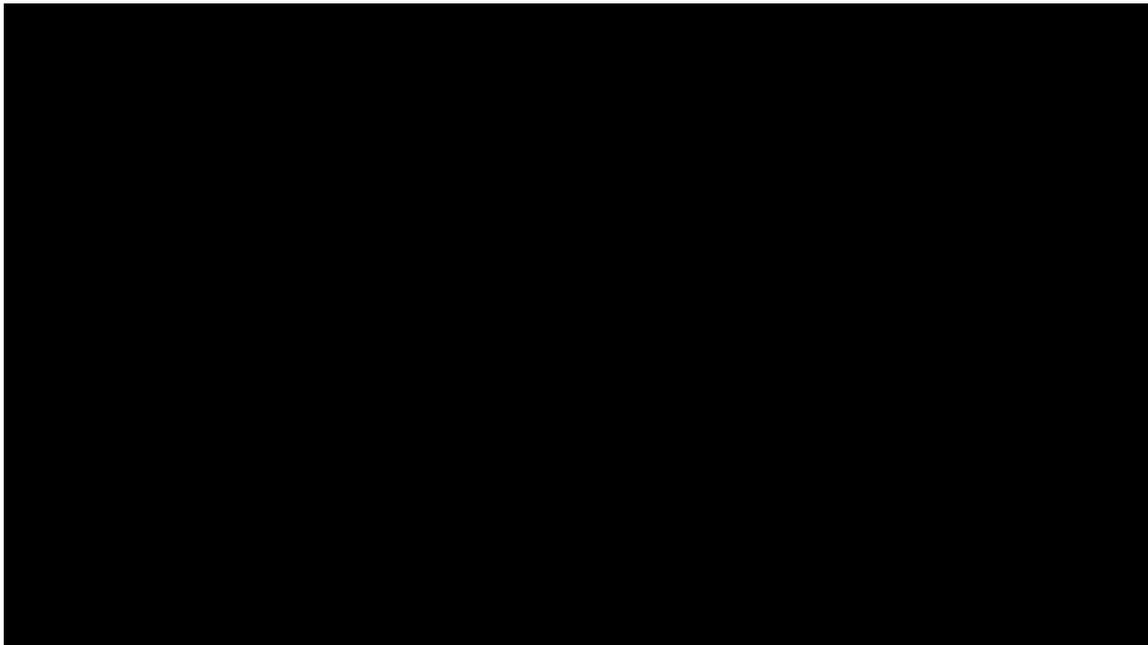
Left Foot

Left Foot is characterised by bouncy body with relaxed waist part and loose head swaying up and down. Dancers dance on tiptoes most of time to create that bouncy motion.

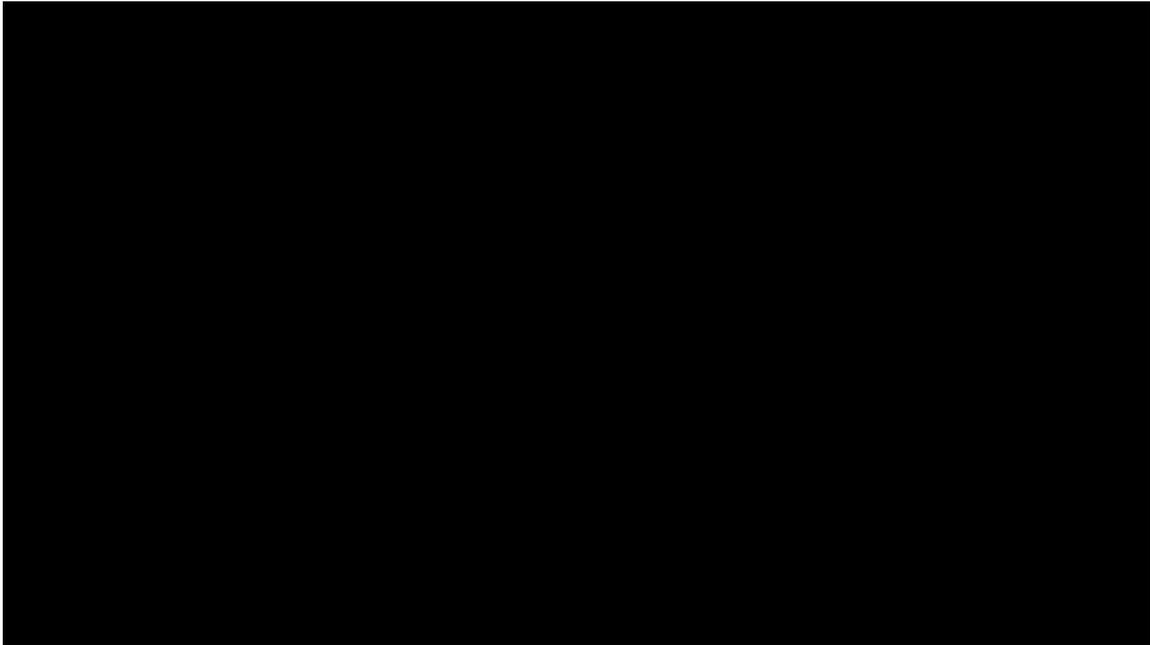
Hua Luo

For this style, dancers tend to step on their toes first, then ball and then heel with their upper body leaning forward and back flat creating manoeuvring of climbing hills while shovelling up things on their back. It has allegro and adagio styles with the former being upbeat, fast and playful and the latter being mellow, soft and elegant.

Video of Allegro



Video of Adagio



Nian Jian Beating Song

Compared to Ma An Shan Beating Song, Nian Jian Beating Song is much slower and sedate. Dancers make grounded stance and move the upper and lower body of the same side in opposition to our natural movement; for instance, when dancers reach out their right leg forward, they push their right shoulder forward rather than left one.





2. Miao Ethnic Dance

The Miao, or Hmong, is China's fifth largest ethnic group, and one of the most ancient. Before the Qin Dynasty, the Miao lived near the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Today the group is mostly found in central and southwest China. Through the centuries, the Miao diversified further into over one hundred groups, each with its own unique customs, traditional dress, and unique dance style. The Miao, for example, have more than ten different drum dance styles alone, including one that is performed in water.

Embroidered costumes and elaborate silver jewelry feature prominently in Hmong ethnic dances. In Miao culture, silver ornaments not only equal high social status, symbolizing prosperity and happiness, they are also believed to possess the power of warding off evil. Interestingly enough, Miao females like wearing their hair in a high bun on the right side

of their head, which is similar to the hair styles of terracotta armies from over 3000 years ago; according to historians, Miao people did have influence on people of Qin dynasty or earlier when the terracotta army was built.



Miao women drape themselves in ornate silver headdresses, necklaces, and bracelets. They are covered—literally from head to toe—with bells and charms that swing and jingle with the slightest motion. Dancers move to accompanying drumbeats, and the strong sense of rhythm increases the speed and strength of the dancing, creating a jubilant mood. This melding of movement and melody are the hallmark of Miao folk dance, and the jingling jewelry creates a ringing that is infectiously jolly.

Miao Ethnic Female Costumes





The Miao consider big, heavy, and copious jewelry to be a display of the clan's economic status and esteem. And so Miao dances use movements that fully express the abundance of the jewelry by maximizing the jingling sounds it produces.

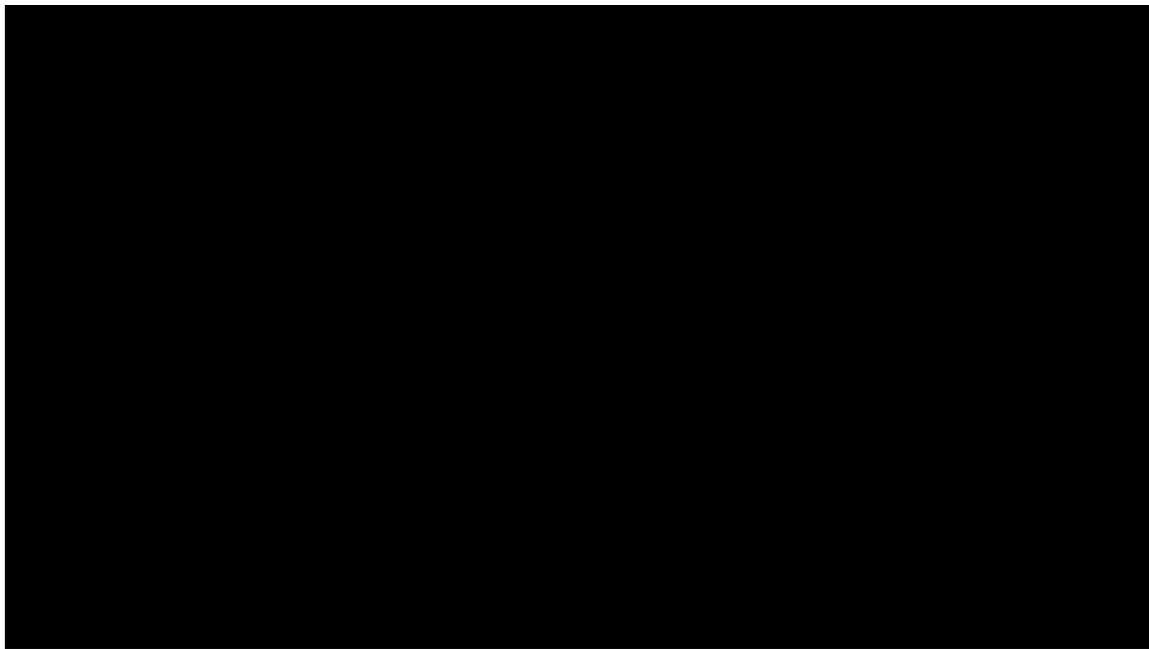
Large quantities of heavy silver can weigh down a person, and Miao dance styles have adapted accordingly. Free-swinging hands and hips are a common theme, as is lifting the upper legs first in order to move the lower leg. Other common moves incorporate spinning, clapping, crossing the

hands and feet, swaying the head and hips, and small jump-kicks.

Typical dance combinations repeat and swap the main movements. Extensive and fast-paced dancing causes the ladies' pleated skirts to unfurl into different shapes. Each dance combination is filled with the bubbly energy characteristic of Miao dance.

For this course, we learnt five styles of Miao dance: Drum Routine (Basic Routine), Shoulders & Steps, Drum Stamping, Bridge Stamping, Fan Pai.

Video for Highlights of Miao Ethnic Dance



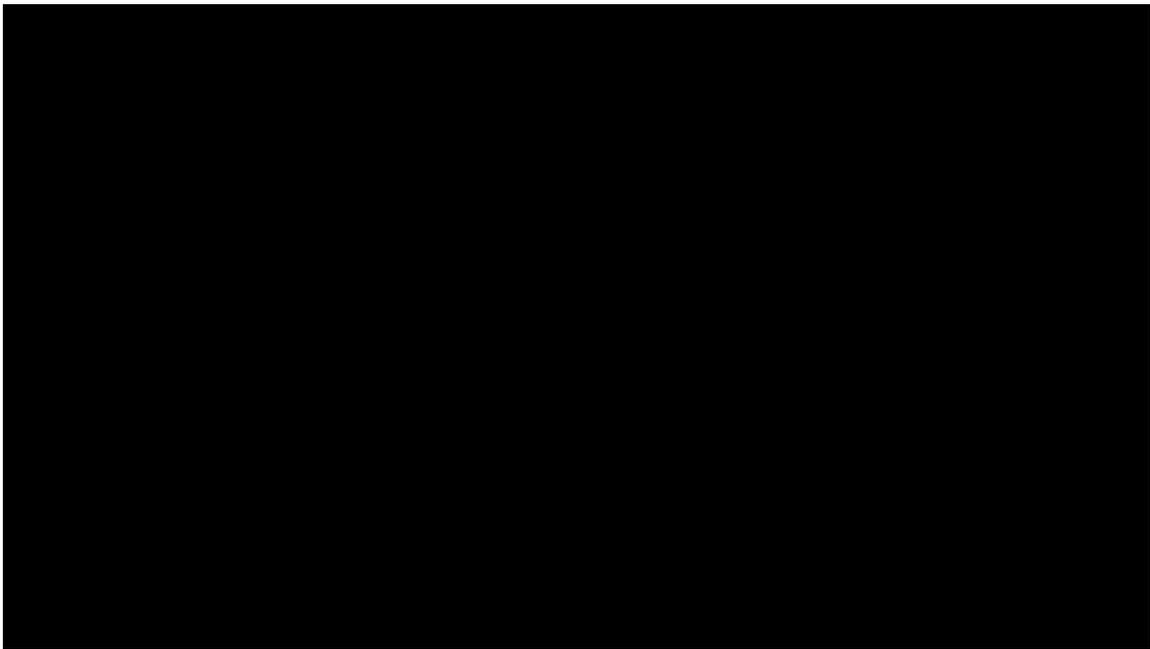
Drum Routine (Basic Routine)

The signature movement of this routine is swinging two arms in opposite directions up and down forcefully with the front arm either in the chest level or above the head; when the

front arm comes down, knees bend and the upper body leans back; when the arms swap the position, knees and the body straighten. The arm movements lead to the natural motions of the body and head.

Shoulders & Steps

In this style, a lot of movements are initiated by the shoulders and totally relaxed arms are subsequently swayed freely and broadly.



Drum Stamping

Dancer sway arms side to side leading to the body turn either half a circle or a full circle; dancers also do stamping, sliding, clapping and jumping in this style.

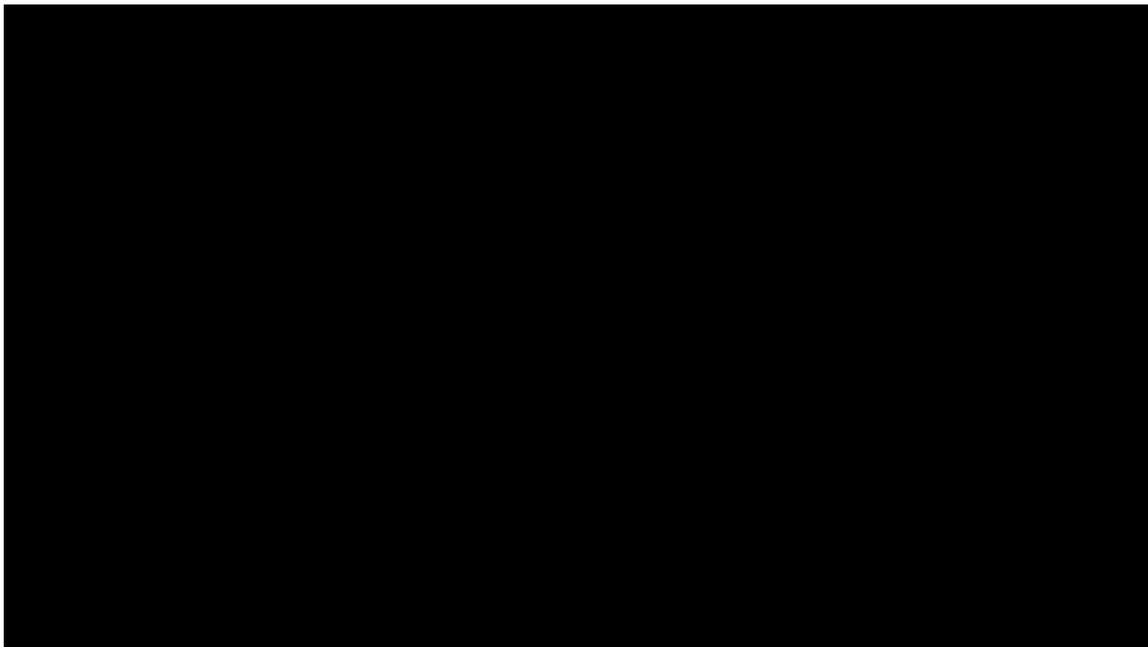
Bridge Stamping

Dancers sway arms up and down and throw the upper arm backwards to its maximum extent while lifting a knee to its highest point or walking while they are squadding low. The signature movement for this style is the upper part of arms

move up and down rapidly with the head swaying up and down and also one foot is lifted sharply in front of the other thigh as if kicking a shuttlecock.

Fan Pai

This is the most symbolic style for Miao ethnic dance. It is very upbeat, energetic and bold to powerful drum beats. Dancers lift their foot as described in Bridge Stamping style while swaying their head as well as the upper part of the arm on the same side as the lifted foot backwards rapidly and then recover slowly. The typical movement of this style is hopping sideways while swaying arms (one forward and one backward) followed by lifting one foot high and rapidly and simultaneously looking down to the same side as the moving foot and subsequently spinning around on one foot either half circle or a full one; this movement can be done in various combinations.





3. Zhuang Ethnic Dance

Zhuang is the largest ethnic minority group in China mostly inhabiting Guangxi Zhuang Ethnic Autonomous Region, located in Southwest of China famous for its stunning sceneries in Gui Lin and Yang Shuo.

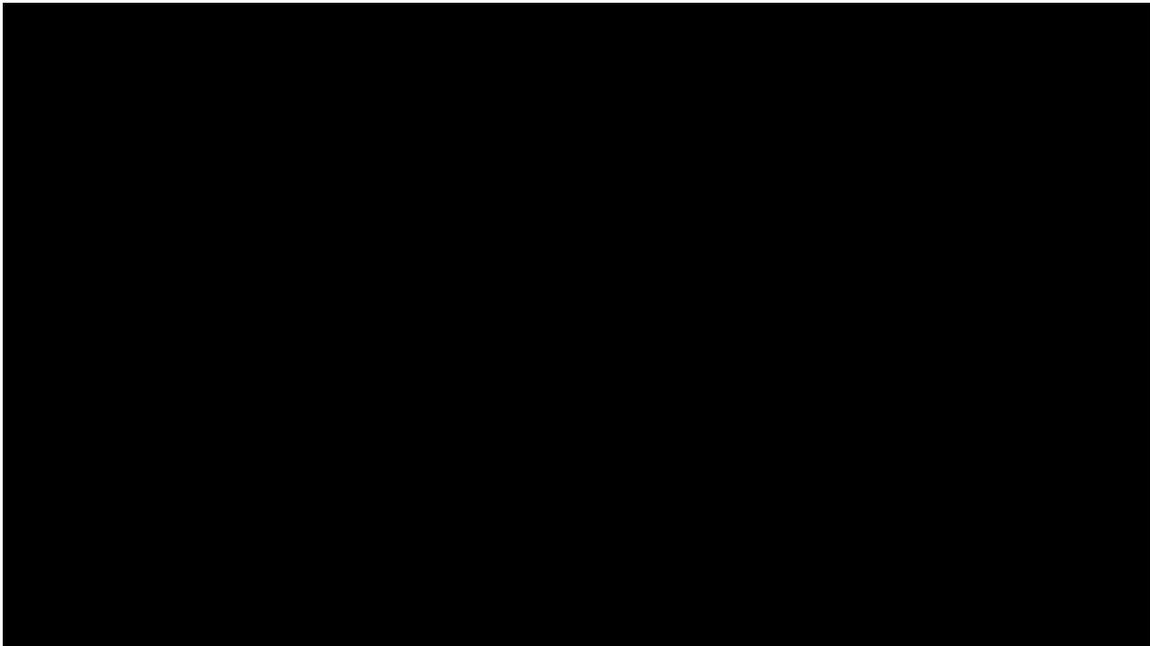
Zhuang people are renowned for their singing talent. Their dance styles are closely related to their daily activities, ritual and religion. Compare to the previous two dance styles, Zhuang dance is more varied in terms of styles, dynamics and movement quality, and also generally less vigorous and more delicate. Zhuang ethnic dance is influenced by other dance styles or ethnic groups like Mongolian dance, Dai dance and classical dance.

Zhuang Ethnic Female Costumes



During this course, we learnt 6 styles and routines of Zhuang dance: Twist & Sway, Sway & Bounce, Hips Twirling, Steps of Zhuang Opera, Zhuang Tea Picking, Shoulder Poles.

Video for Highlights of Zhuang Ethnic Dance



Twist & Sway

The movements are fairly controlled and grounded, that requires dancers to use their breathing (inhaling and exhaling) at the point of changing a position or a movement to generate the fluidity of the movements. It has influences from other ethnic dances including Mongolian and Dai dance.



Sway & Bounce

This style is closely linked to their ritual and belief about witchcraft. Dancers' basic stance is the back slightly hunched, arms forming a circle shape with fingers naturally spreading out and eyes fiercely looking forward to fashion an image of a wizard. Dancers sway their body forward and back and change directions sharply following a small and swift jump.

Hips Twirling

The basic stance for this style is the same as Sway and Bounce. Eponymously the dance is characterised with twirling hips around and also pushing pelvis forward and backward sharply to signify birth and express local people's hope and praying for reproduction and offspring.

Steps of Zhuang Opera

This is a more feminine and exquisite dance from Zhuang ethnic dance with some movements from classical dance and opera. The step or walk in this dance is slow and flowing with an accent at the beginning.



Zhuang Tea Picking

There are many types of tea picking dance in China from different regions of the country. Zhuang Tea Picking dance is cheerful and breezy depicting a joyful scene while Zhuang girls are picking tea with arm swaying, finger flicking, hops and jumps in the dance.







Auxiliary Activities

Beijing is the hub for arts and culture with a good choice of theatres and shows. August was a dance season with many spectacular shows to watch so I would certainly not like to miss this special occasion and watched several classical and contemporary dance shows and plays. I also met up with some of my artist friends in Beijing to catch up and talk about possible future collaboration.

Outcome & Plans

Upon the completion of the course, I was awarded a certificate. Since I came back to the UK, I have shared the dance I learned in this trip with the audience in Liverpool and China during the Chinese delegation's visit to Liverpool in September and my trip in China in October respectively. The governor of Qian Dong Nan prefecture in Guizhou Province, where a great number of Miao people live, has expressed his interest in appointing me as their cultural ambassador in U.K.

In the pipeline, I am planning to produce a Chinese ethnic cultural show next year including the three dances I learned this time and also develop new dance pieces from these three ethnic groups to perform in the U.K.

In summary, this trip has given me a great opportunity to learn new Chinese folk dance styles, inspiration and information for my choreography and creative producing; it will thus provide British audience a chance to experience new Chinese dances and gain deeper knowledge about

China and Chinese ethnic culture. Additionally I made new friends and connected with old contacts so the trip strengthened my professional and personal networks. Moreover, on a personal level, the training has enhanced my self confidence and a sense of accomplishment by challenging myself with unfamiliar dances and gaining new skills within a short time period. Finally, I want to thank LUTSF and my family and friends who supported me for this trip.

Certificate





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