

Research on Chinese Ethnic Dance Therapy: Progress, Problems and Prospects

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Abstract. Since its rise in the West in the mid-20th century, dance movement therapy has gained extensive empirical support in fields including clinical psychology, special education and community health. However, Western dance movement therapy takes individualism as its core value, and there is notable tension between its movement vocabulary and body concepts and China's collectivist cultural tradition as well as the body philosophy of "unity of body and mind". China is home to rich and diverse dance cultural heritage of 56 ethnic groups. These ethnic dances naturally carry the functions of emotional catharsis, social connection and ritual healing, providing unique cultural resources for the localization of dance movement therapy. This paper adopts the literature research method to systematically sort out 19 core papers in the field of Chinese ethnic dance therapy, and presents the research progress from six dimensions: teaching curriculum practice, significance and value, emotional intervention, path exploration, theoretical construction and healing mechanism. The study finds that ethnic dance therapy achieves remarkable effects in promoting physical and mental health, regulating emotions, enhancing social connection and cultural identity, and the research has gradually expanded from practical application to the exploration of localization paths and the construction of theoretical systems. This paper further identifies the shortcomings of current research in empirical methods, theoretical integration and disciplinary development, and proposes future directions such as expanding research subjects, enriching research methods and deepening theoretical construction, so as to provide references for the academic development and clinical practice of ethnic dance therapy.

Keywords: Dance Movement Therapy, ethnic dance, localization, cultural adaptation, mental health intervention

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

As a psychotherapy discipline that uses movement as the medium, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) has developed multiple classic schools such as Chace, Evan and Laban since it emerged in the United States in the mid-20th century, and has obtained wide empirical support in clinical psychology, special education, community health and other fields. The American Dance Therapy

Association defines it as "a form of psychotherapy that uses dance or movement processes to promote the emotional, physical, cognitive and social integration of individuals". However, current dance movement therapy is still dominated by the West, and its individualist orientation, movement vocabulary and body concepts are greatly different from China's collectivist cultural tradition and the body philosophy of "unity of body and mind". As some scholars have noted, dance movement therapy originating from Western clinical psychology faces the fundamental tension of cultural adaptation in the Chinese context — the former centers on individual symptom repair, while the latter lays more emphasis on relationship adjustment and overall balance.

At the same time, China boasts rich and colorful dance cultural heritage of 56 ethnic groups. From Tibetan Guozhuang to Mongolian Andai, from Dai Guang dance to Han Yangge, these ethnic dances are not only artistic expressions, but also naturally contain the functions of emotional release, social bonding and ritual healing. In recent years, a growing number of researchers have begun to explore combining Chinese ethnic dance elements with dance therapy concepts to form an intervention model with local cultural appropriateness — that is, "ethnic dance therapy". The international academic circle has also started to pay attention to this trend. Some studies point out that dance interventions (including ethnic dance) have positive impacts on depression, cognitive function, neuromotor function and so on, and dance therapy integrated with Chinese dance elements is even listed as one of the most effective intervention methods for depression.

1.2. Theoretical and practical motivations

The theoretical motivation of this study is that the localization of dance movement therapy has become an important topic in the international dance therapy academia. Studies show that cultural adaptation is a key variable for the successful implementation of dance movement therapy in East Asian countries. However, existing discussions on localization mostly stay at the level of theoretical appeals, lacking systematic sorting and theoretical refinement of China's existing local practices. The practical motivation of this study is that mental health problems among Chinese college students and the elderly are becoming increasingly prominent, and there is an urgent need for diversified psychological intervention methods. As an intervention approach with both cultural affinity and mind-body integration function, ethnic dance therapy has broad application prospects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Western origins and core paradigms of dance therapy

As an academic discipline, dance therapy traces its theoretical foundation back to the exploration of the mind-body relationship by modern dance in the early 20th century, as well as the psychoanalytic school's attention to non-verbal expression. As a pioneer of dance therapy, Marian Chace emphasized promoting emotional expression and interpersonal interaction through dance movements; Laban developed a movement analysis system, providing systematic movement observation and assessment tools for dance therapy. Contemporary dance therapy research has expanded from verifying clinical efficacy to exploring neuroscientific mechanisms. A review notes that dance is associated with increased brain volume and function as well as neurotrophic growth functions. Other studies show that dance interventions can significantly reduce anxiety and depression levels and improve negative emotions in the elderly.

Nevertheless, dance therapy faces obvious challenges of cultural adaptation in cross-cultural dissemination. Some studies point out that cultural values deeply affect people's movement patterns

and self-expression, and dance therapy originating from the Western individualist tradition requires fundamental adjustments in collectivist cultures. The consideration of cultural factors is crucial for the localization of dance therapy in new environments [1].

2.2. Research progress of Chinese ethnic dance therapy

Research on Chinese ethnic dance therapy started relatively late but develops rapidly. Through sorting out 19 core papers, the research progress can be summarized into six themes:

In terms of teaching curriculum practice, researchers have combined ethnic dances such as Yi Yanhe Dance, Miao Wooden Drum Dance, Dunhuang Dance and Tibetan Guozhuang with dance therapy theories to design courses and carry out teaching practice. Taking Dunhuang Dance as the medium, a three-stage healing curriculum system of "mind-body cognition — body awareness — mind-body integration" has been constructed [2].

In terms of significance and value, scholars generally hold that ethnic dance can play a positive role in physical, psychological, social and cultural dimensions. Some research points out that the healing function of ethnic folk dance may be weakened by its light and pleasant appearance, which needs to be explored through systematic research.

In terms of emotional intervention, after a six-week Andai dance intervention, it was found that the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale scores of the experimental group dropped significantly [3], which also confirmed the positive effect of Dunhuang Dance therapy on college students' mental health [4].

In terms of path exploration, the four-dimensional integrated framework of "culture — movement — relationship — field" explores the Chinese path of dance therapy from the three dimensions of "body · culture · healing" [5].

In terms of theoretical construction, a healing analysis model for Xinjiang dance was built from the three dimensions of body, psychology and culture. A three-layer theoretical framework of "cultural biomechanics — neuroaesthetic participation — collective embodiment" was put forward [6].

In terms of healing mechanism, it emphasizes that artistic practice blends with daily life and cultural inheritance, and proposes the viewpoints of "integration of medicine and art" and "unity of artist and therapy" [7].

The international academic circle has also begun to focus on the unique value of Chinese ethnic dance therapy. The theoretical framework of Chinese dance therapy covers principles such as ontological identity, social inclusion, aesthetic catharsis, symbolic exorcism and Buddhist mindfulness. From the perspectives of cultural anthropology and health science, nine healing principles of Tujia ethnic dance are discussed. A network meta-analysis further shows that dance therapy integrated with Chinese dance elements ranks first in efficacy among depression interventions.

3. Theoretical framework and research methods

3.1. Theoretical foundation

The three-dimensional integrated analytical framework of "culture — body — psychology" constructed in this study aims to comprehensively examine the theoretical basis and practical path of Chinese ethnic dance therapy from multiple dimensions.

In the cultural dimension, the analysis focuses on cultural adaptation and the localization process. Since dance therapy was introduced into China from the West, it is bound to face the tension of

cultural logic between individualism and collectivism, and between direct expression and implicit communication. The collective memory, symbolic symbols and ritual functions accumulated in ethnic dance provide important local cultural resources for the transformation and rooting of this foreign method in the Chinese context.

The physical dimension is rooted in the body view of "unity of body and mind" in traditional Chinese philosophy. Different from Western mind-body dualism, traditional Chinese thought stresses "unity of form and spirit" and "vivid charm of qi", and regards the body as a holistic entity that carries spirit and emotion. Ethnic dance promotes the circulation of qi and blood and regulates visceral functions through specific body movements. Its physical mechanism is not a pure physiological response, but a holistic practice embedded in specific cultural logic.

In the psychological dimension, the framework absorbs the core psychological mechanisms of Western dance therapy such as emotional expression, social connection and self-cognition, and integrates local Chinese understanding of mental health. With the help of group synchronization, rhythmic resonance and symbolic movement language, ethnic dance promotes emotional release and the establishment of a sense of social belonging in the field of collective participation.

The three dimensions are not parallel or separated from each other, but a system of dynamic interweaving and circular feedback: cultural concepts are transformed into perceivable psychological experiences through specific physical practices, and changes in psychological state in turn regulate the expression of the body and exert a continuous influence on the intensity of cultural identity. This non-linear interactive relationship constitutes the core logic of this framework for explaining the efficacy of ethnic dance therapy.

3.2. Research methods

This paper uses the literature research method to systematically retrieve and comprehensively analyze the existing achievements in the field of Chinese ethnic dance therapy.

In the analysis stage, the thematic analysis method is introduced to code and categorize the 19 papers one by one, and finally extract six core thematic dimensions, namely teaching curriculum practice, interpretation of significance and value, application of emotional intervention, path exploration, attempts at theoretical construction and discussion of healing mechanism. The research subjects, intervention methods, core findings and theoretical contributions of each paper are extracted one by one, and compared and analyzed horizontally to clarify the continuity and differences among different studies.

To ensure the scientificity and traceability of the research process, a multi-database cross strategy is adopted for literature retrieval to reduce single-database bias. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are clarified in advance and independently implemented by two researchers, and any disagreement is resolved through negotiation. In the coding process, the generation and adjustment of thematic categories follow the principles of repeated comparison and reverse verification, so as to reduce the influence of subjective assumptions on the analysis results. Generally speaking, the selection of the literature research method fits the current situation that research in this field is still in the accumulation stage, and the above operation process also provides a defensible methodological basis for subsequent trend judgment and theoretical reflection.

4. Research results and analysis

4.1. Teaching curriculum design

From the perspective of teaching practice research, curriculum design and implementation is the area with the most concentrated achievements of Chinese ethnic dance therapy at present. We have retrieved five relevant papers, which focus on four dance forms: Yi Yanhe Dance, Miao Wooden Drum Dance, Dunhuang Dance and Tibetan Guozhuang, and the intervention subjects are mainly students at school.

These studies follow a similar path in curriculum construction: first select a certain ethnic dance, then connect it with the basic concepts of dance therapy, design a complete teaching plan accordingly, then carry it out in actual classrooms, and finally evaluate the psychological changes of participants through pre-test and post-test or interviews. One of the studies is done in more detail: it takes somatics theory as the framework, extends the whole course to 18 weeks, and divides it into three progressive stages of "mind-body cognition — body awareness — mind-body integration"; in terms of content arrangement, it integrates therapeutic combination exercises in prop use, typical image extraction and temperament connotation. According to the report of this study, this Dunhuang Dance course has indeed shown positive effects in relieving physical discomfort, regulating internal psychological conflicts and improving interpersonal relationships.

Looking back at the common points of these curriculum designs, the most prominent feature is that they do not simply piece ethnic dance movements and psychotherapy methods together, but strive to make the two truly "integrate" at the operational level — letting the vocabulary of dance itself and the intention of therapy permeate each other. Researchers generally realize that ethnic dance inherently has both the function of physical training and the potential of psychological adjustment. The key is how to systematically sort out these originally scattered elements and apply them in a verifiable way.

4.2. Significance and value

The research progress of Chinese ethnic dance therapy is consistent with the trend of international research on the localization of dance therapy, but also presents distinct differences.

The similarity is that, consistent with international research, Chinese research also confirms the improvement effect of dance interventions on negative emotions such as depression and anxiety. Research on the localization of dance therapy in East Asian countries finds that cultural adaptation is the key to the successful implementation of dance therapy — this conclusion has been fully verified in the research on Chinese ethnic dance therapy.

The difference is that Western dance therapy research pays more attention to individual-level psychological mechanisms (such as self-expression and personal growth), while Chinese research lays more emphasis on collective-level social functions (such as social connection, cultural identity and group belonging). This difference reflects the fundamental distinction between collectivist and individualist cultural values. In addition, Chinese research's focus on the cultural symbols and ritual functions of ethnic dance is a dimension rarely involved in Western dance therapy research.

4.3. Theoretical implications

The value of ethnic dance therapy can be understood from four dimensions: physical, psychological, social and cultural, and these four levels are not independent of each other, but intertwined and

mutually permeated. However, a problem that is often ignored in reality is that the natural cheerful and lively temperament of ethnic folk dance tends to make people underestimate its real healing potential — people often think it is just "dancing and having fun". As for how it deeply affects people's physical and mental state, it needs to be revealed through systematic research. Existing papers generally agree that this form of dance can help improve flexibility, coordination and muscle tension, and relieve chronic tension at the physical function level; at the psychological level, it provides a non-verbal outlet for people to release pent-up emotions and adjust their mood in rhythm; in terms of social relations, the sense of group belonging brought by dancing together is quite obvious; and in the cultural dimension, it constantly awakens and strengthens individuals' identity and emotional connection with their own ethnic traditions.

The previously proposed three-dimensional integrated framework of "culture — body — psychology" shows good explanatory power in preliminary tests, which also suggests that the localization of dance therapy is far from making superficial technical improvements on the Western model, but requires holistic reconstruction starting from the three pillars of cultural value system, body philosophy and psychological mechanism. The root of the therapeutic effect of ethnic dance therapy lies in that it mobilizes multiple paths at the same time — movement input at the physical level directly activates the nervous system and improves proprioception; rhythmic synchronization and movement echo during group dancing build an intimate connection of "same-frequency resonance" among people, thus strengthening the sense of social support; meanwhile, the symbols, images and collective memory contained in the dance continuously inject energy into cultural identity. The joint effect of these forces is the core difference between ethnic dance therapy and mainstream Western dance movement therapy, and also its greatest feature.

Of course, we should also clearly recognize that the theoretical construction in this field is still in its initial stage. Although some scholars have put forward insightful analytical frameworks, most of them stay at the level of conceptual deduction and lack empirical support from large samples and multiple groups. To make the theory truly solid in the future, it is necessary to repeatedly test, revise and improve it in a wider range of ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds.

From the perspective of practical application, this therapy has shown considerable prospects. On campus, ethnic dance healing courses can be incorporated into the mental health education system of colleges and universities. For example, course models like Dunhuang Dance with distinct cultural symbols have a good foundation for standardization, and are fully qualified to be replicated and promoted in other colleges and universities. At the community level, ethnic dance therapy has low cost, low participation threshold and high public acceptance, so it is very suitable as a supplementary means of grassroots psychological intervention. This direction also has certain reference significance for the formulation of public health policies. Exploration in cross-cultural contexts is also encouraging — studies show that dance interventions integrated with traditional Chinese dance elements have clear auxiliary improvement effects on patients with depression, which also provides enlightenment worthy of in-depth exploration for building a more culturally sensitive psychotherapy system.

5. Conclusion

After years of development, research on Chinese ethnic dance therapy has formed six main research directions: teaching curriculum practice, significance and value, emotional intervention, path exploration, theoretical construction and healing mechanism, presenting a clear evolution path from practical exploration to theoretical construction. Existing studies fully show that ethnic dance can play a positive role in promoting physical and mental health, regulating emotions, enhancing social

connection and strengthening cultural identity. At the same time, the research perspective is gradually expanding from simple effect verification to the exploration of localization paths and the construction of theoretical systems. Research on Chinese ethnic dance therapy has initially formed a development framework with local characteristics, laying a foundation for subsequent theoretical deepening and practical expansion.

However, current research still faces several bottlenecks that need to be broken through urgently: in terms of research methods, there is a lack of large-sample randomized controlled trials and long-term follow-up studies, and the external validity of research conclusions needs to be strengthened; in terms of theoretical construction, the connection mechanism between Western theoretical frameworks and Chinese local practices has not been fully explained; in terms of disciplinary development, standardized talent training systems and professional certification mechanisms are still absent.

Based on the above analysis, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: First, future research should expand research subjects to cover groups of different ages, different cultural backgrounds and different types of psychological problems; second, empirical research methods should be enriched by introducing randomized controlled trials, mixed research methods and cross-cultural comparative studies; third, theoretical construction should be deepened. On the basis of the existing "culture — body — psychology" framework, the interdisciplinary perspectives of neuroscience, cultural anthropology and psychotherapy should be further integrated; fourth, disciplinary development should be promoted, and standardized training systems, ethical norms and effect evaluation standards for ethnic dance therapy should be established. Only in this way can Chinese ethnic dance therapy truly realize the transformation from cultural resources to scientific intervention, and contribute unique value to the construction of the national mental health service system.

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