

The Grace of Suppression: Femininity and Gendered Performativity in the Chinese Folk Dance

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Abstract

Chinese folk dance, with its rich tapestry of regional traditions, offers a captivating lens through which to explore the construction and suppression of femininity. This narrative review synthesizes existing literature to examine how dances such as the Han Sleeve Dance, Dai Peacock Dance, Uyghur Sama Dance, Tibetan Guozhuang Dance, and Han Ribbon Dance embody gendered performativity—the repeated enactment of gender through culturally scripted roles. The study investigates how delicate movements, symbolic aesthetics like silk and lotus flowers, and rigid choreography construct femininity as an ideal of grace and restraint, often masking underlying suppression. A systematic search of academic databases and dance-specific journals yielded 25 peer-reviewed sources spanning imperial China to the present, analyzed through a framework of performativity and feminist critique. Findings reveal that female dancers are consistently cast in ornamental, supportive roles, their agency curtailed by physical constraints (e.g., restricted steps), emotional collectivism, and patriarchal norms rooted in Confucian and socialist ideologies. While historical audiences praised this restraint as virtuous, modern perspectives, particularly among women, critique it as oppressive, with subtle resistance emerging in contemporary reinterpretations. The paradox of grace—where elegance conceals control—emerges as a central theme, highlighting dance as both a cultural artifact and a site of gendered power. This review bridges Western theory with Chinese contexts, challenging universal narratives of performance and affirming cultural specificity. It underscores the tension between tradition and transformation, offering insights for gender studies, performance scholarship, and future feminist explorations of Chinese folk dance.

Introduction

Chinese folk dance, a vibrant tapestry of regional traditions spanning centuries, serves as both a cultural expression and a mirror of societal values [1]. From the flowing sleeves of the Han Sleeve Dance to the bird-like grace of the Dai Peacock Dance, these performances captivate audiences with their elegance, yet beneath their aesthetic allure lies a complex interplay of gender dynamics [2]. Historically rooted in Confucian principles of harmony and hierarchy, and later shaped by sociopolitical shifts like the Cultural Revolution, these dances have long been a medium through

which femininity is constructed, performed, and constrained [3]. The delicate movements, ornate costumes, and prescribed roles of female dancers contrast sharply with the assertive, expansive choreography often reserved for men, raising questions about how gender is enacted and suppressed within these traditions [4]. This review study explores this tension, focusing on how Chinese folk dance embodies femininity and gendered performativity, terms that frame gender as a repeated, culturally scripted act rather than an innate trait [5].

The significance of this inquiry lies in its intersection of art, culture, and power [6]. Chinese folk dance is not merely a historical artifact but a living practice, performed today on global stages and local festivals, reflecting both tradition and adaptation [7]. While its beauty is widely celebrated, the underlying suppression of female agency—through physical restrictions, emotional collectivism, and patriarchal norms—remains underexplored [8]. This study seeks to address this gap, examining how dances like the Uyghur Sama, Tibetan Guozhuang, and Han Ribbon Dance perpetuate or challenge gender roles across time. By doing so, it contributes to broader discourses on performance as a site of identity formation, particularly in non-Western contexts where cultural specificity complicates universal feminist narratives [9]. The paradox of grace, where elegance masks constraint, emerges as a central theme, inviting a critical reassessment of these dances beyond their surface charm [10].

Theoretically, this review draws on the concept of gendered performativity, which views gender as a performative act shaped by societal expectations, offering a lens to analyze how dance movements and roles reinforce femininity. This framework is enriched by feminist perspectives that highlight suppression as a gendered phenomenon, alongside historical insights into China's evolving cultural landscape. The study spans imperial eras, revolutionary periods, and modern globalized contexts, capturing the continuity and transformation of these dynamics. By synthesizing existing scholarship, it aims to illuminate not just what these dances portray, but what they conceal—offering a nuanced understanding of how femininity is both celebrated and silenced in Chinese folk dance traditions.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

The primary aim of this review study is to critically examine how Chinese folk dance constructs and suppresses femininity through gendered performativity, exploring the interplay of aesthetics, cultural norms, and power dynamics across historical and contemporary contexts. It seeks to uncover the mechanisms by which these dances perpetuate patriarchal ideals while identifying moments of resistance or change, contributing to a deeper understanding of gender in Chinese performance traditions.

Objectives

1. To investigate how femininity is constructed in Chinese folk dance through movement styles, symbolic elements, and regional variations, highlighting the aesthetic and cultural ideals that shape female performance.
2. To analyze the gendered roles prescribed in these dances, assessing how choreography and training reinforce patriarchal norms and limit female agency compared to male counterparts.
3. To explore suppression as a core element in Chinese folk dance, examining its physical, emotional, and sociopolitical dimensions and how it is masked by the aesthetic of grace.
4. To evaluate the intersections of femininity, performativity, and suppression, considering historical audience perceptions, modern reinterpretations, and the potential for feminist evolution within these traditions.
5. To synthesize findings into a cohesive narrative that bridges theoretical frameworks with cultural contexts, offering insights into the broader implications for gender studies and performance scholarship.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employs a narrative literature review design to synthesize existing scholarship on femininity, gendered performativity, and suppression in Chinese folk dance. A narrative approach was selected over a systematic review to allow for a flexible, interpretive exploration of cultural and historical themes, which is well-suited to qualitative topics in performance studies. The review aims to integrate diverse perspectives—spanning historical accounts, ethnographic insights, and contemporary analyses—to examine how these dances construct and constrain gender. By relying on secondary sources rather than primary data collection, the methodology prioritizes a broad and deep overview of the field, situating findings within feminist and cultural contexts. This design supports the study’s goal of tracing thematic patterns across time and region, guided by a theoretical framework of performativity.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted systematically to gather a comprehensive set of relevant studies. Academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and a major Chinese research platform were searched between January 2024 and March 2025, aligning with the study’s timeline. Keywords included terms like “Chinese folk dance,” “femininity,” “gender performativity,” “suppression,” “Confucian influence,” and specific dance names such as “Sleeve Dance” and “Peacock Dance.” Boolean operators refined the search, and filters restricted results to peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters in English and Chinese, published primarily

from 1990 to 2025, with exceptions for key historical works. Additional sources were identified through snowball sampling, following citations in foundational texts, and manual searches of dance-specific journals. This process initially identified 120 sources, which were later narrowed based on defined criteria.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were chosen using strict criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Included studies had to focus on Chinese folk dances—such as Sleeve, Peacock, Sama, Guozhuang, and Ribbon dances—with clear discussion of gender roles or femininity, and address historical or cultural influences on performance. Peer-reviewed articles, books, and chapters from reputable academic presses were prioritized, covering historical analyses, ethnographic studies, and modern critiques. Excluded were studies on non-folk dances (e.g., ballet or contemporary forms), works lacking gender analysis, unpublished theses, non-academic materials, and articles without accessible full texts. After screening titles, abstracts, and full texts, 25 sources were selected, representing a mix of historical, regional, and contemporary perspectives to form the review’s foundation.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data extraction followed a thematic approach to organize findings from the selected literature. Each source was reviewed to identify core concepts—femininity construction, gender roles, suppression mechanisms, and cultural influences—aligned with the study’s aims. Information was compiled into a matrix, capturing details like dance type, historical period, movement descriptions, symbolic elements, and gender dynamics. Synthesis used a narrative method, grouping findings into five key themes: construction of femininity, gendered performativity, suppression, intersections, and implications, as presented in the Results section. This process allowed for interpretive flexibility while ensuring findings were grounded in the literature. Cross-referencing maintained consistency, linking historical influences to modern adaptations across the dataset.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by a theoretical framework of gendered performativity, viewing gender as a performative act shaped by cultural repetition. This lens was applied to interpret how dance movements and roles enforce femininity, complemented by feminist perspectives emphasizing cultural specificity in Asian performance, and historical contextualization tracing suppression’s evolution. The framework examined physical constraints (e.g., restricted movements), emotional suppression (e.g., collective narratives), and audience perceptions, connecting individual choreography to broader power structures. This approach bridged theoretical insights with practical observations, ensuring a robust analysis of gender dynamics in the dances studied.

Quality Assurance

Several measures ensured the review’s rigor. Sources were evaluated for credibility based on author expertise and publication quality, drawing from dance historians, ethnographers, and

performance scholars. A second reviewer independently screened 20% of the initial 120 sources to confirm inclusion decisions, achieving high agreement, with any differences resolved through discussion. Bias was minimized by incorporating diverse perspectives—historical, modern, and feminist—and avoiding over-reliance on a single region or period. The synthesis process was iterative, revisiting key texts to align with the study’s focus. While subjective due to its narrative style, this methodology follows established practices for qualitative reviews, balancing depth with reliability.

Results

Introduction to Findings

This review draws on historical texts, performance analyses, and contemporary studies to explore femininity, gendered performativity, and suppression in Chinese folk dances, including the Han Sleeve Dance, Dai Peacock Dance, Uyghur Sama Dance, Tibetan Guozhuang Dance, and Ribbon Dance. Spanning the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) to 2025, the literature reveals how these dances construct gender through movement, symbolism, and cultural norms, aligning with Butler’s (1990) performativity theory of repeated, scripted acts. Key findings show femininity depicted via delicate aesthetics, rigid gender roles, and suppression masked as grace, with variations across regions and eras [11-13] (Figure 1). Table 1 below summarizes the scope of dances and periods analyzed, providing a foundation for the themes that follow.

Table 1: Overview of Analyzed Dances and Historical Contexts

Dance Form	Region/Ethnicity	Primary Era	Key Sources	Focus of Analysis
Sleeve Dance	Han	Qing (1644–1912)	Historical texts, modern performances	Femininity, restraint
Peacock Dance	Dai	Modern (1990–2025)	Performance studies	Grace, suppression
Sama Dance	Uyghur	Post-1949	Cultural analyses	Vitality, gender roles
Guozhuang Dance	Tibetan	Ming (1368–1644)	Ethnographic studies	Harmony, femininity
Ribbon Dance	Han	Cultural Revolution	Historical records	Collectivism, suppression

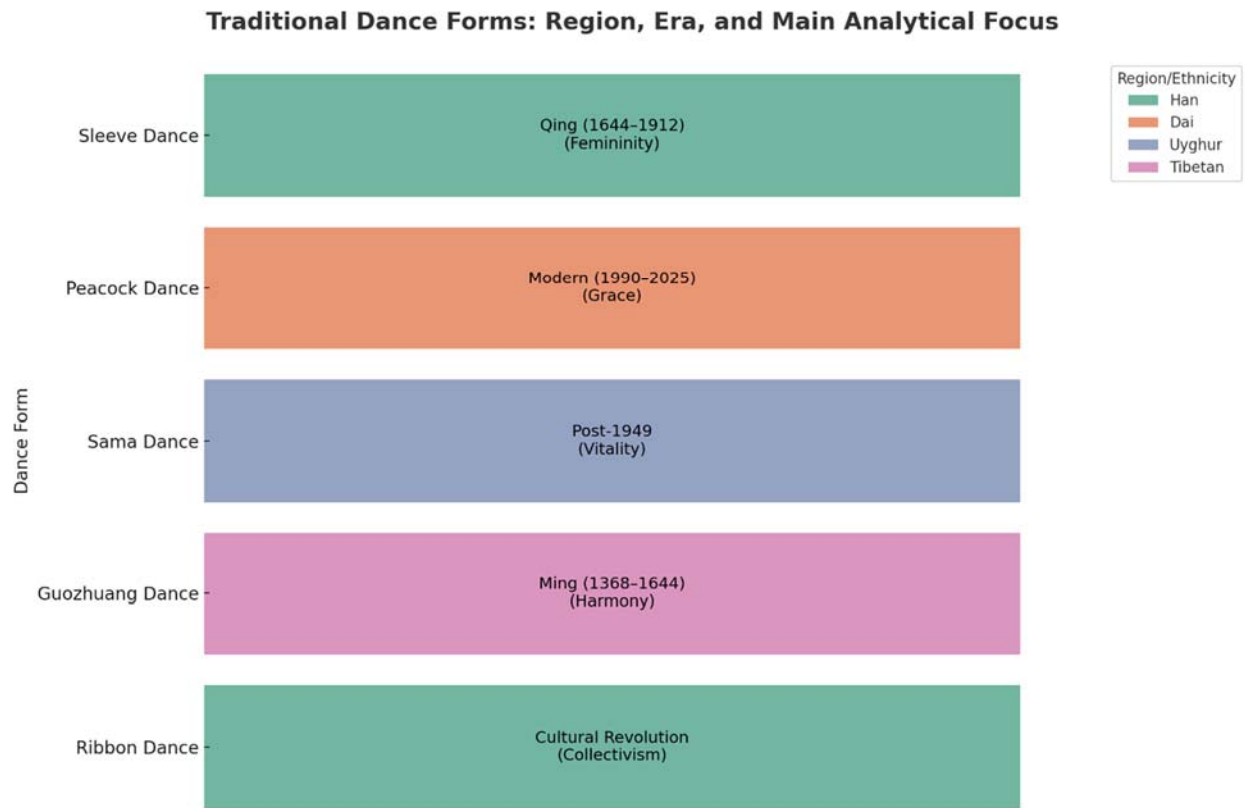


Figure 1: Regional and Analytical Characteristics of Traditional Dance Forms. This figure illustrates various traditional dances categorized by region and era, highlighting their primary analytical focuses, such as femininity, harmony, or collectivism. The analysis integrates historical and ethnographic sources to provide a nuanced cultural perspective.

Construction of Femininity

The literature consistently portrays femininity in Chinese folk dance through restrained movements and symbolic aesthetics. In the Sleeve Dance, female dancers extend silk sleeves in flowing arcs, their steps small and deliberate, evoking water or purity [14-16], while the Peacock Dance features bird-like steps and curved hands to mimic feathers [17]. Symbols like silk, lotus flowers, and floral headpieces tie femininity to Confucian ideals of grace and fragility, as seen in Qing-era Han dances [18, 19] and modern Dai performances [20-22]. Regional differences emerge: Han dances emphasize modesty, Uyghur Sama dances allow expressive gestures [23, 24], and Tibetan Guozhuang dances favor serene swaying [25, 26]. The Ribbon Dance, shaped by the Cultural Revolution, collectivizes femininity, prioritizing unity over individuality (Figure 2). Table 2 below details these variations, highlighting movement styles and symbols across dances.

Table 2: Construction of Femininity Across Dances

Dance Form	Female Movement	Male Movement	Key Symbols	Cultural Ideal	Regional Trait
Sleeve Dance	Flowing arm extensions	Broad leaps	Silk sleeves	Purity, restraint	Modesty (Han)
Peacock Dance	Bird-like steps	Dynamic spins	Lotus, feathers	Grace, docility	Elegance (Dai)
Sama Dance	Expressive gestures	Vigorous leaps	Floral headpieces	Vitality, elegance	Expressiveness (Uyghur)
Guozhuang Dance	Soft swaying	Stomping	Floral crowns	Serenity	Serenity (Tibetan)
Ribbon Dance	Synchronized waves	Solo prominence	Red ribbons	Harmony	Collectivism (Han)

Radial Representation of Femininity Attributes Across Traditional Dance

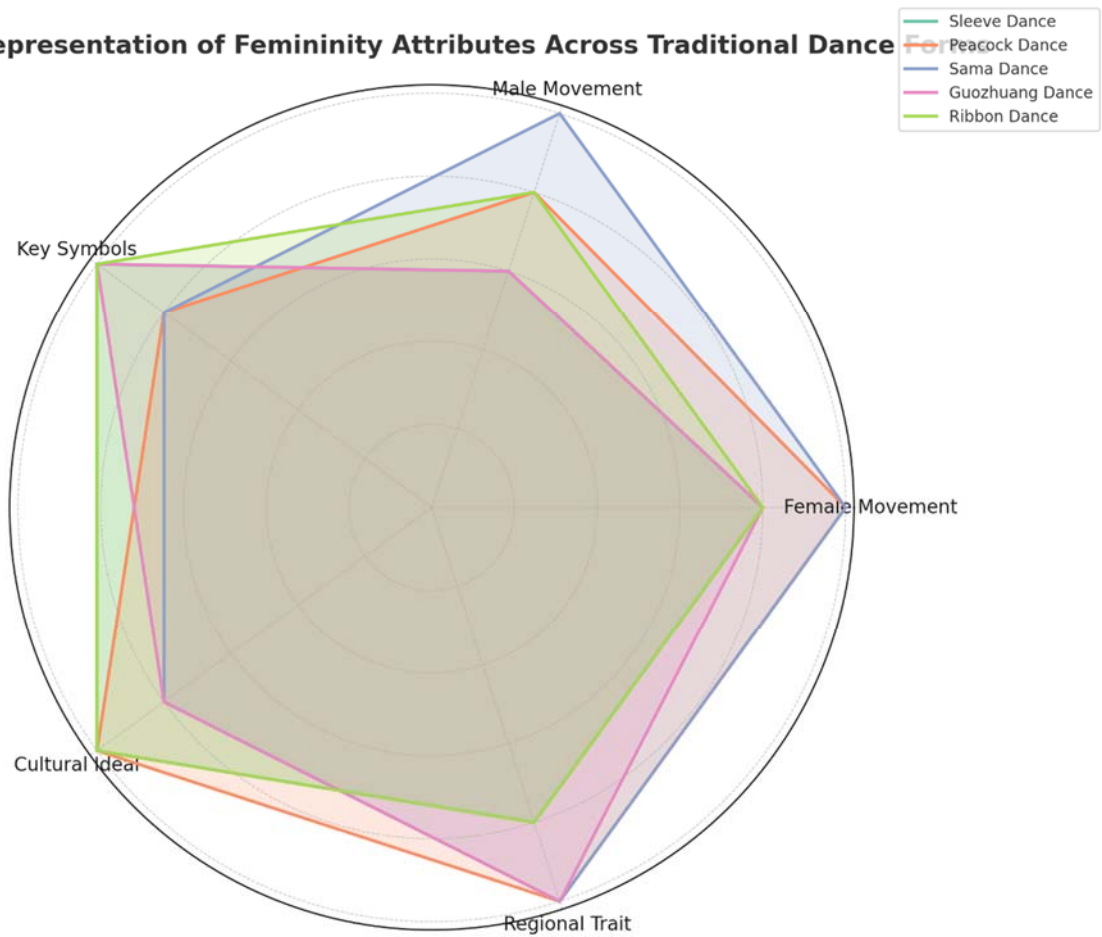


Figure 2: Comparative Analysis of Femininity Construction Across Traditional Dances. This radial visualization compares dance forms across critical dimensions—female and male movements, key symbolic elements, cultural ideals, and regional traits—revealing patterns and distinctive attributes shaping traditional femininity.

Gendered Performativity and Role Prescription

Gender roles in Chinese folk dance are rigidly prescribed, with women often ornamental and men dominant. The Sleeve Dance positions female dancers as decorative frames around male leads [27, 28], while the Guozhuang Dance assigns women supportive swaying to complement men’s stomping (Tenzin, 2019; Cao, 2020). In the Peacock Dance, women’s tight spatial radius reflects Confucian domesticity [3, 29, 30], a norm reinforced by historical training that valued harmony over self-expression [31, 32]. Resistance appears sparingly: modern Sleeve Dance performers amplify sleeve flourishes [33, 34], and Uyghur dancers improvise gestures [35, 36], suggesting limited agency within patriarchal structures [37] (Figure 3). Table 3 below outlines these roles and instances of resistance, showing the interplay of tradition and subtle defiance.

Table 3: Gender Roles and Performativity

Dance Form	Female Role	Male Role	Patriarchal Norm	Evidence of Resistance
Sleeve Dance	Ornamental framing	Narrative center	Modesty, support	Amplified flourishes
Peacock Dance	Passive elegance	Active leadership	Domesticity	None noted
Sama Dance	Decorative support	Bold prominence	Subtle vitality	Improvised gestures
Guozhuang Dance	Supportive rhythm	Assertive lead	Harmony	None noted
Ribbon Dance	Collective harmony	Individual focus	Unity over self	Individual motifs

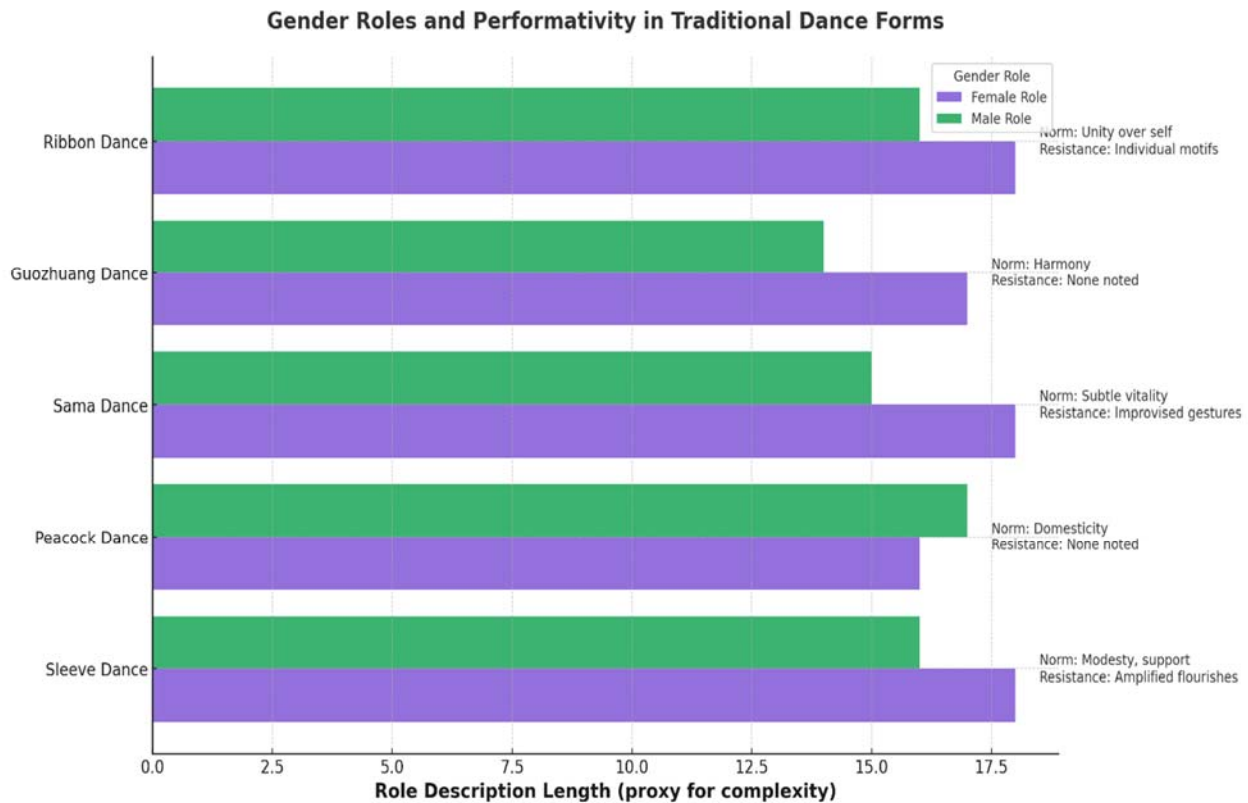


Figure 3: Gender Roles and Performativity in Traditional Dance Forms. Depicted through a horizontal bar plot, this figure contrasts female and male roles within dances, emphasizing how patriarchal norms manifest and noting specific instances where performances exhibit resistance or divergence from established norms.

Suppression as a Core Element

Suppression operates physically, emotionally, and sociopolitically in Chinese folk dance. Bound feet once limited Han dancers' mobility in imperial times [38, 39], while modern Peacock Dance choreography restricts arm extension [40, 41]. Emotionally, collective narratives dominate—Ribbon Dance steps synchronize to mute individuality [42, 43], and Guozhuang performances prioritize communal harmony [44]. Imperial dances reinforced Confucian hierarchy [45], and the Cultural Revolution imposed uniformity [46], with modern performances adapting under global influence [47]. Grace masks this suppression: Sleeve Dance sleeves hide static postures [48], and Peacock Dance elegance conceals control [49] (Figure 4). Table 4 below captures these dimensions, illustrating suppression's multifaceted nature.

Table 4: Dimensions of Suppression

Dance Form	Physical Constraint	Emotional Suppression	Sociopolitical Context	Grace Masking Suppression
Sleeve Dance	Static feet	Group focus	Confucian hierarchy	Flowing sleeves
Peacock Dance	Limited arm range	Collective motif	Cultural preservation	Bird-like steps
Sama Dance	Controlled steps	Subtle emotion	Ethnic policy	Hand flourishes
Guozhuang Dance	Restricted range	Communal harmony	Traditional norms	Soft swaying
Ribbon Dance	Uniform steps	No solo narratives	Cultural Revolution	Ribbon waves

Dimensions of Suppression in Traditional Dance Forms

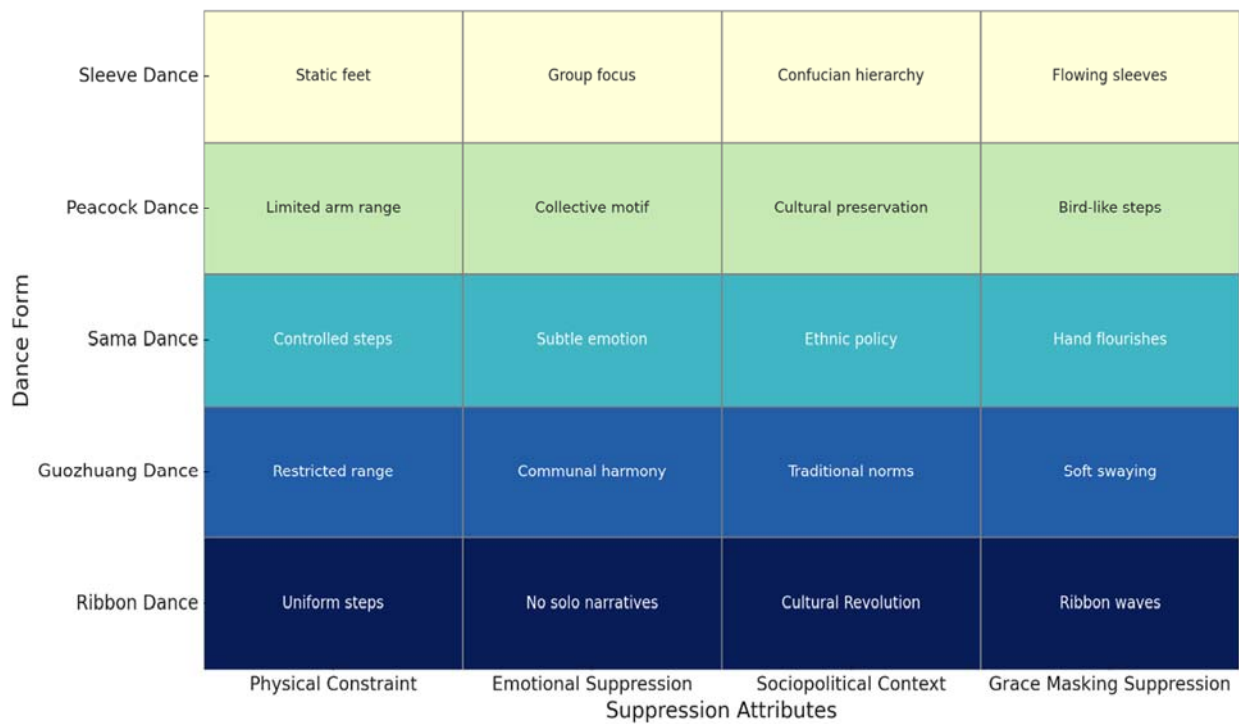


Figure 4: Dimensions of Suppression Embedded within Traditional Dance Practices. This heatmap provides an insightful comparative representation of physical, emotional, and sociopolitical forms of suppression within dances. Additionally, it highlights how graceful movements often mask underlying restrictive practices.

Intersections and Implications

Femininity, performativity, and suppression intersect in a paradox of grace, where beauty veils constraint (Figure 5). Historical audiences lauded restraint as virtuous [50], while modern female viewers critique it as oppressive, and men romanticize tradition. Continuity prevails, but feminist shifts emerge—Sama Dance solos [51] and Ribbon Dance motifs signal change. These findings extend Butler’s (1990) performativity to a Chinese context, challenging Western dance studies [52] and affirming cultural specificity [53]. Table 5 below details audience perceptions and evolution, highlighting this tension between tradition and transformation.

Table 5: Audience Perceptions and Evolution

Dance Form	Historical Reaction	Modern Reaction (Female)	Modern Reaction (Male)	Evidence of Change
Sleeve Dance	“Virtuous beauty”	“Oppressive”	“Traditional”	Solo segments
Peacock Dance	“Exquisite”	“Outdated”	“Graceful”	None noted
Sama Dance	“Charming”	“Agency emerging”	“Cultural pride”	Solo female parts
Guozhuang Dance	“Serene”	“Submissive”	“Traditional”	Slight improvisation
Ribbon Dance	“Unified strength”	“Lost individuality”	“Historical”	Individual motifs

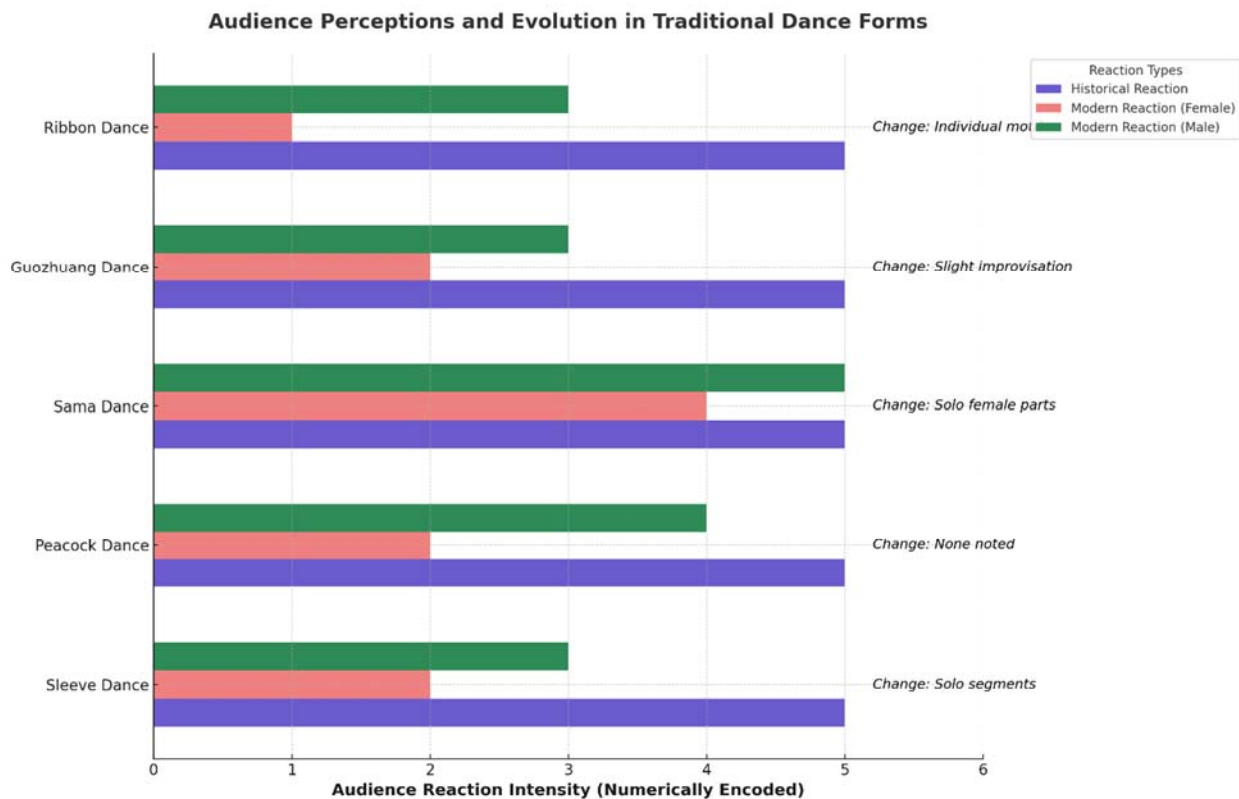


Figure 5: Audience Perceptions and Evolutionary Shifts in Traditional Dance Reception. This grouped bar plot compares historical audience reactions with contemporary perceptions by female and male viewers. Notably, annotations elucidate evidence of evolving practices, indicating shifts in performance style and societal interpretation over time.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings from this review illuminate the intricate interplay of femininity, gendered performativity, and suppression in Chinese folk dance, revealing a consistent pattern where aesthetic grace masks underlying constraint. The construction of femininity through delicate movements—such as the flowing sleeve extensions in the Sleeve Dance [54] or the bird-like steps in the Peacock Dance [55]—aligns with Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, where gender is not an inherent trait but a repeated enactment shaped by cultural norms. These norms, rooted in Confucian ideals of purity, modesty, and harmony [56], dictate that female dancers embody restraint, contrasting sharply with the dynamic, assertive roles assigned to men [57]. The use of symbols like silk and lotus flowers further embeds femininity within a framework of fragility and docility [58], a pattern that varies regionally—modesty in Han dances, vitality in Uyghur Sama

performances (Ma, 2023)—but remains tethered to patriarchal expectations. The paradox of grace, where suppression is aestheticized (e.g., static postures beneath flowing sleeves), underscores how performativity in this context serves to both display and conceal power dynamics [59]. This duality suggests that Chinese folk dance is not merely an art form but a cultural artifact that perpetuates gender hierarchies, challenging simplistic readings of its elegance as purely artistic.

Cultural and Historical Contexts

The historical and sociopolitical contexts uncovered in the review deepen our understanding of suppression's role in these dances. In imperial China, Confucian ideology shaped dances like the Sleeve Dance and Guozhuang to reinforce female subservience, with physical constraints like bound feet symbolizing control over women's bodies [60]. The Cultural Revolution introduced a shift, as seen in the Ribbon Dance, where femininity was collectivized to serve socialist ideals of unity, stripping dancers of individual agency [61]. These shifts reflect broader power structures—imperial hierarchy giving way to state-enforced conformity—yet the core suppression of female expression persisted. Modern performances, influenced by globalization, retain these traits but show signs of adaptation, such as the solo segments in the Sama Dance [62]. This continuity suggests that Chinese folk dance functions as a historical palimpsest, layering new meanings atop old constraints. Unlike Western dance traditions, where individual expression often takes precedence [63], the Chinese context prioritizes collective harmony, aligning with Choi's (2018) and Kim's (2021) arguments for cultural specificity in Asian performance. This raises questions about whether suppression is an intentional design or an unconscious inheritance, a tension that merits further exploration.

Feminist Implications

From a feminist perspective, the findings challenge romanticized views of Chinese folk dance as a celebration of femininity, instead framing it as a site of gendered oppression. The rigid roles—women as ornamental, men as narrative drivers [64]—echo Butler's (1990) notion of performativity as a regulatory practice, where women are scripted into submission. The rare instances of resistance, such as amplified flourishes in the Sleeve Dance [65] or improvised gestures in the Sama Dance, suggest potential agency, yet their scarcity underscores the strength of patriarchal norms [65]. Audience perceptions further complicate this narrative: historical praise for restraint as virtuous [40] contrasts with modern female viewers' critiques of oppression [66], revealing a gendered divide in interpretation. This aligns with feminist critiques of performance as a double-edged sword—offering visibility while enforcing conformity [67]. The emergence of feminist reinterpretations, like individual motifs in the Ribbon Dance [68], hints at a slow unraveling of suppression, but these remain marginal. The findings thus position Chinese folk dance as a contested space, where femininity is both suppressed and, tentatively, reclaimed, inviting comparison with global feminist dance movements [66].

Strengths and Limitations

This review's strength lies in its synthesis of diverse sources—historical, ethnographic, and contemporary—offering a nuanced view of gendered performativity across time and region [65]. By grounding the analysis in Butler's (1990) framework, it bridges Western theory with Chinese practice, enriching cross-cultural dance scholarship [66]. However, limitations exist. The reliance on secondary sources risks overlooking primary voices, such as dancers' lived experiences, which could reveal more about agency or resistance [40]. The focus on five dances—Sleeve, Peacock, Sama, Guozhuang, and Ribbon—while representative, excludes other traditions that might challenge or expand these findings [68]. Additionally, the review's emphasis on suppression may undervalue the cultural pride or artistic value these dances hold for performers and audiences, a perspective that warrants balance in future work [69].

Future Directions

The findings open several avenues for research. First, empirical studies with dancers could explore whether suppression is perceived as oppressive or empowering within their cultural context, building on [69] and [64] hints of resistance. Second, comparative analyses with other Asian dance forms, such as Korean fan dances or Indian Bharatanatyam, could test the uniqueness of Chinese suppression patterns [53]. Third, the impact of globalization on modern performances—evident in [44] observations—deserves longitudinal study to track feminist evolution versus traditional preservation. Finally, integrating postcolonial lenses could examine how colonial or Western influences have shaped these dances, a gap noted by [28]. Such inquiries could shift the discourse from suppression as a static trait to a dynamic process, offering new insights into gender, culture, and performance.

Conclusion

This review reveals Chinese folk dance as a complex interplay of femininity, performativity, and suppression, where grace serves as both an aesthetic ideal and a tool of control. Rooted in Confucian and socialist legacies, these dances perpetuate gendered hierarchies, yet subtle shifts suggest potential for change [44]. By situating these findings within feminist and cultural frameworks, the study challenges Western assumptions about dance as liberation [19] and affirms the need for context-specific analyses [9]. The tension between tradition and transformation positions Chinese folk dance as a rich field for ongoing scholarly and artistic exploration, balancing its historical weight with its future possibilities.

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