

# Research on the Historical Causes and Social Functions of the Mass Group Dance in 17-Years Period in China

Hui-jia Sun\*

College of Music, Northeast Normal University. Changchun, China.  
sunjiahui2025@163.com

Yi Cao

Yangtse River School, Changchun, China.  
Tougao@123

**Abstract:** This article explores the historical causes, such as the changes of the social structure and social physiology, and social functions of mass group dance in 17-years period in China.

**Keywords:** 17-Years Period; Mass Group Dance; Morphological; Historical Causes; Function

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the 17-years period of China (1949-1966), mass group dance became the main form of mass entertainment. Many magazines and newspapers recorded that, under the call of the government, the mass group dance activities, whether in factories, schools or production cooperatives, were in full swing. What historical factors helped creating the mass group dance and pushed it to the front stage? What impact did the mass group dance have? These are the problems which this article wants to address.

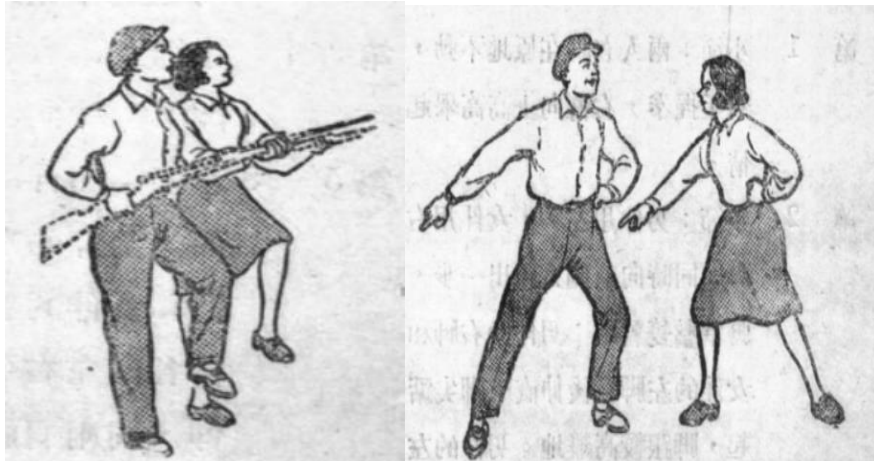
## 2. THE MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MASS GROUP DANCE IN 17-YEARS PERIOD

### 2.1 Content of mass group dance in 17-years period:

In terms of content, the theme of group dance in this period is close to life and reflects the real society. The movements are simple and uniform. The atmosphere is positive, relaxed and pleasant. During the 17-years period, the mass group dance mainly showed the development of various undertakings and encouraged the enthusiasm of the construction of new China. The Theme of mass group dance in 17-years period are as follows :

Important political event. The mass group dance *Mighty Manly Dance* created by the dance group of Beijing People's Printing Factory, cheered up the soldiers who fought against the United States and defended the country through dance. In the dance, the arms are bent upward and the hands are clenched in the position of looking out through binoculars. In bars 3-4, the right arm is bent, the right hand is made into a fist, the left arm is raised flat, and the left hand is made into a fist, showing a gun holding position (FIG. 1). In the third paragraph, there is a military salute with five fingers together and the fingertips pointing to the temples. In the fourth paragraph, the male and female companions present supplies to the front line with their arms raised flat and slightly bent, and then again in the position of holding a gun. Finally, they make a fist with their left hand and point out with their right hand, indicating the joy of victory (FIG. 2). *The Great Leap Dance*, *Yangko Dance for The Great Leap*, *People's Commune's Song* show the Great Leap and the People's Commune Movement. Mass Art Museum in Henan Province compiled the *People's Commune Really good Group Dance* (1959) recorded a total of four works, *People's Commune really good* and *Singing people's Commune* expressed the broad masses of people's yearning for the people's commune and the production of the masses after the commune, *Celebrating the New Year* is a performance of the commune movement's achievements in iron and steel, agriculture, animal husbandry, commune and other aspects and people's mood to celebrate the New Year.

School lives. In 1955, the dance work *The Party on the Warship* created by Guangzhou No. 1 Middle School showed the young pioneers' love for the navy uncle. On September 25th, 1950, in order to meet the representatives of the World Youth Federation led by Bugara to Peking University, the students of Peking University performed a group dance *Unity is strength* for them at six o'clock in the afternoon, through singing and dancing to show the brave and unyielding spirit in the War. In 1952, in order to celebrate the "May Fourth" Youth Day, more than 300,000 students in the capital held a group dance activity to show the happy life of young people through dance. In *The New Children's Song and Dance Album* compiled by Beijing Mass Art Museum, the children's group dance work *I Have a small Wooden Gun* (FIG. 3) is recorded. The dance shows a little boy learning target shooting. The little boy imitated soldiers shooting with a gun in his right hand, running with a submachine gun in his hand, dodging when shooting, and inserting the gun into his waistband. The "target" was also made on the props, and the lyrics of the music also highlighted the theme: "I love my small wooden gun, carrying it on my back, the People's Liberation Army is a good example, and I grew up like my uncle." (Beijing, 1983)



**Figure 1:** Gun Holding Position

**Figure 2:** Joy of Victory Position

Life for Soldiers. Showing the spirit of the people's army is also one of the themes of the 17-years mass group dance. The repertoire and dance language of the group dance activities carried out by the army are more generous and powerful. *Military group dance* reflects the life of the army and is very suitable for soldiers to participate in. There are also military salutes and other movements with military characteristics in the dance, as shown in Figure 3. The choreogists also briefly described the main points of the dance, "When dancing, pay attention to the cheerful and powerful movements, happy and proud emotions, and fully show the spirit of soldiers".(Shanghai, 1957) Published in 1952, *Singing the Great Unity of the Chinese and Soviet People Entertainment Materials* recorded the dancing method of *Soldier Group Dance*. This work was co-created by all the students of the "Dance Movement Class", carefully refining the combat movements of the PLA soldiers in the daily training process, such as holding guns, dropping bombs, etc. (FIG 4, FIG 5) *Soldier group dance* is created by dancers, fully combines the characteristics of soldiers, and is easier to promote in the army. Group dance activities can make soldiers in the hard training to get appropriate relaxation, morale, soldiers can better devote to the cause of defending the country (Yong et al., 2022).



**Figure 3:** Military salutes

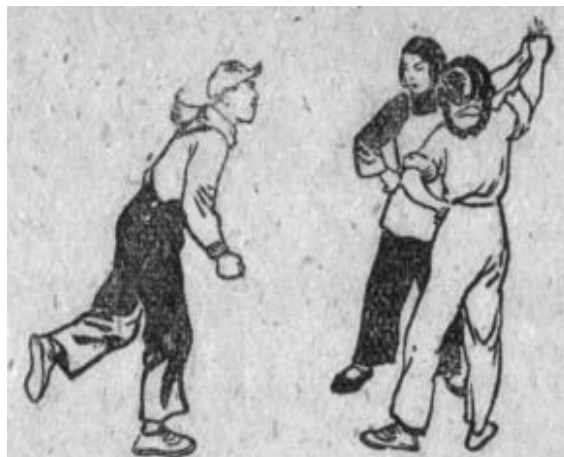


**Figure 4:** Holding guns



**Figure 5:** Dropping bombs

New life of labors. The factory is also a place where group dancing activities are concentrated. The factory will organize group dancing activities beside the working hours. In 1958, *The National Day Group Dance Album 8*, recorded *The Labor Happiness Dance* choreographed by Tianding, in which the choreography is derived from daily work, such as: Male partner with hands clenched fists down to make a cart loading, as shown in Figure 6. In the compilation and creation of the mass group dance work *Work Ballad* published in 1951, there are also simulated blacksmithing movements. These mass group dance works are jointly created by professional dancers, choreographers or the masses, and artistically integrate the daily labor movements of the factory into the theme movements of the group dance after refining and beautify processing, reproducing the busy scene of the factory under the production of the big factory, so that all factory workers participating in the collective dance activities can adjust and relax their bodies and minds. These group dances can help labors better participate in the work of large factories, unite the collective, and improve the efficiency of factory production.



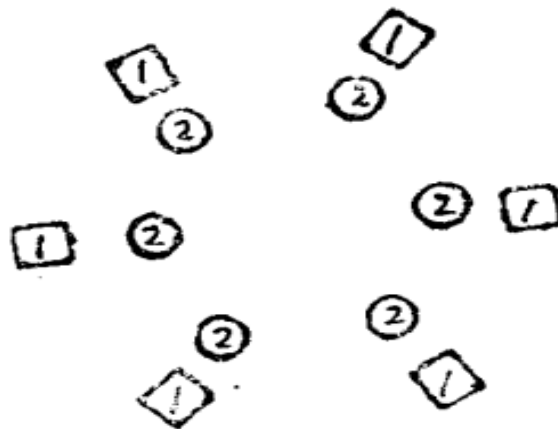
**Figure 6:** *The Labor Happiness Dance*

In addition, a large number of foreign group dances have also been introduced to China. For example, *Hungarian Group Dance* is published in 1952, *Soviet Folk Dance* and *Soviet Dance* is published in 1953.

## 2.2 Forms of mass group dance in 17-years period:

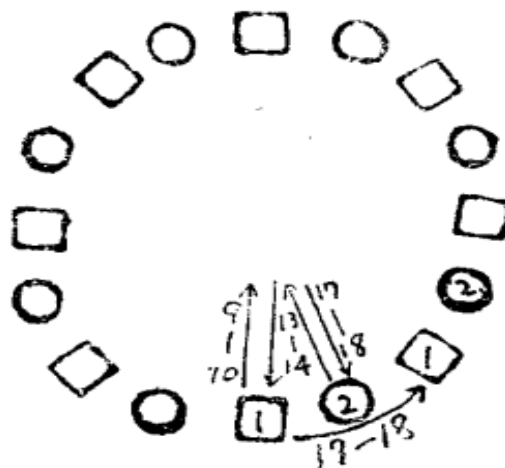
In terms of composition, the mass group dance is mainly in the shape of a circle. There are 3 kinds of circle patterns: First is contredanse pattern in circles. contredanse pattern dance is a form of dance that exists all over the world and is more common in Chinese ethnic folk dances. In the 17-years mass group dance works, the form of contredanse based on standing in a circle is very common. The combination of circular composition and the

dance form is a creation in line with people's aesthetic consciousness, which makes the dance non use of the traditional mode of having to stand in two long lines to form communication, and enrich the circle composition performance form of 17-years mass group dance. This is the result of a combination of dance form and circular composition. Contredanse pattern include two patterns: double round circles and circles with a center. A double round circle is consisted of two circles, one women and one men, generally a male and a female into a pair of partners (FIG 7). Circles with a center means one dancer stand on the center of the circle.



**Figure 7:** Double round circle pattern

Second is circle dance pattern, which include two patterns: step into center pattern—dancers on the circle step into center one by one (FIG 8); alternating pattern—dancers exchange their position with their neighbors (Adams & Lasseigne, 2018).



**Figure 8:** Step into center pattern

Third is circular composition pattern—circle composed of multiple graphs. Solar pattern—groups stand in lines radiating outward; Flower pattern—a big circle consist of some small circles like a flower.

### 3. THE HISTORICAL CAUSE OF THE MASS GROUP DANCE IN 17-YEARS PERIOD

#### 3.1 Social factors in the 17-years period:

Changes in the social structure. Firstly, the social center shifted from rural areas to urban areas. Before new China, the art movement led by the Communist Party of China was mainly carried out in the revolutionary base areas in the countryside. Therefore, the main form of the movement is the New Yangko and Yangko Opera, which are learned from the folk and processed by the artists. After the founding of new China, although the form of yangko and waist drum also flooded into the city, people need a form of mass dance suitable for urban life. With the transfer of the political center of the ruling party from the countryside to the city, the emergence of mass group dance has become a historical necessity. During the 17-years period, in the National Day or the Labour Day, the most popular and lively movement is the mass group dance. “In the uniform form of the group dance, in the dance of the uniform movement, people feel the sense of belonging brought by the collective form.”(ZHANG, 2009) First, The venue of mass dance activities moved from the village and alley to the city, The number of participants in the mass dance has increased significantly compared with the past. Group dance uses a large number of circle composition can accommodate more people to participate in it. Second, The circle formation is arbitrary and inclusive. Participants can either join or withdraw at any time, Will not affect the whole process of the dance activity. Third, each dancer on the circle is equidistant from the center of the circle, The circle of the group dance essentially forms an invisible “equal social circle”, In this form, people ignore their differences, advocating equality.

Secondly, the social pattern changed from “differential order” to “equal right order” in 17-years period. Mr. Xiao-tong Fei attributed the traditional Chinese social pattern to the differential order pattern—— a patriarchal individual-centered network society. “Since modern times, more advanced civilizations marked by human awakening and human equality have begun to emerge. Equal rights (including equality between men and women, equality between all people, equality between countries and other contents) has become the general keynote of this new civilization.”(ZHU, 2017) 17-years period is the transformation process of Chinese society from the differential pattern to the equal pattern. At this time, the typical mass dance—— group dance——is also affected by the change of the social pattern, thus presenting a unique form. Since modern times, China has

gradually shifted from differential order pattern to equal right pattern. After the founding of new China, the process of social transformation was accelerated. In the primary stage of socialism where everyone is equal, people's social network is no longer established by blood and geographical factors. Under the constant indoctrination of collectivism ideology, the self is gradually weakened, and there is a common interest subject——collective in the society. This change has also gradually weakened the personal connections between people, and daily life occurs in one group after another. The “group dance” in this period is also a part of the social culture that serves the collective. Therefore, its form should meet the needs of the collective as far as possible, in order to maximize its function. After the founding of new China, the social ideology gradually changed from “egoism” to “collectivism”. The society is no longer divided by power, and the establishment of interpersonal relationship has gradually changed from the maintenance of blood relationship to the establishment of common interests. This period was an emphasis on equality, which not only eliminated the social hierarchy, but also disappeared with the disappearance of “egoism”. The 17-years mass group dance in New China closely meets the needs of social ideology from the aspects of form, arrangement and other, meeting the needs of the public and the country. During this period, the way of mass group dance organization took fairness and equality as the most important things, and called on all members of the group to participate in group dance activities. Most group dances are mainly arranged in circles, with each participant having an equal distance to the center of the circle. They mostly appear as single laps, while double laps are designed to satisfy company combinations and communication. It aimed to eliminate the hierarchical gap between people as much as possible, weaken or even eliminate the “one-person-led” social model, and promote the social structure transformation to the equal rights model.

Changes in the social psychology. Gustave Le Bon said in *The Rabble* that “The disappearance of conscious personality and the transformation of feelings and thoughts towards a certain direction are one of the main characteristics of a group as an organized group”(Gustav & von, 2018). When a person is in the collective, his unconscious personality will gradually occupy the dominant position, through the hint and infection, gradually guide their own emotions and behavior and the group to the same direction. In essence, the emergence of the 17-years mass group dance is the need to construct the social psychology of this era. It is manifested in two aspects:

First, the need to construct the collectivist social psychology. Starting

from Yan'an literature and art, all kinds of art are no longer the exclusive activities of the artists themselves. The literary trend of thought began to develop to the direction of popularization. "In the new society of the future, and in today's new environment, it is completely collectivism. Only collectivism can have strength, only collectivism can develop, inhuman times can replace."(TANG, 2007) In this context, the mass group dance has also become an important means to construct the collectivist social psychology. The form of 17-years mass group dance has been deeply influenced by the ideology of collectivism. Through the strengthening of circular composition, the collective consciousness was strengthened, and the participants gathered in the center of the cycle, producing a strong unity force. Under the government's intervention in mass literature and art, group dance has also become a means to express politics. However, since ancient times, dance has had the effect of pleasing the body and mind and expressing the emotions. Whatever the content of the dance, people can achieve the purpose of self-entertainment and maintain collective unity in one cycle after another.

Second, the need to construct the spiritual identity of new China. Recognition is a psychological process that changes people's subjective wishes. To realize the spiritual identity of new China, we should first "strengthen the sense of community of all ethnic members", and second "strengthen the cultivation of historical memory and the sense of national identity by constructing the common cultural foundation and reconstruction of Chinese national culture"(HAN, 2010 ). The mass group dance in the 17-years period is the cultural symbol of constructing the spiritual identity of new China, among which there are a large number of images of the Communist Party of China leading the revolution to victory and leading the Chinese nation forward.

Changes in the production mode. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, with the development and progress of society, China's production mode has undergone tremendous changes: from the small handicraft production of families to the collective production mode of large factories. This change timely caters to the needs of economic construction of new China, and is also the inevitable trend of modern industrial development. Concentrated, unified and intensive collective productive labor requires the masses to unite; at the same time, this mode of production which occupies almost everyone's daily life is also easy to cause physical and mental exhaustion. In this case, the emergence of group dance alleviates the above contradictions, realizes the combination of work and rest, and ensures the reproduction of labor force. Therefore, in the



early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the workers of the factory became the main force of the mass group dance. After working, they actively participated in the group dance activities, which not only relieved the fatigue of work, but also promoted the collective unity, and thus ensured the normal operation of the factory production and promoted the improvement of production efficiency. In the 17-years mass group dance, the form of male and female dance also creates opportunities for young men and women to communicate and promote their feelings. In fact, it is also to strengthen the collective control of large factories over the private field and control individual time in each link. Advocate “love the factory like love the family” selfless dedication spirit, strengthen the sense of collectivism.

### 3.2 The continuation of the New Yangko Movement:

The Yan'an New Yangko Movement in 1942 which began to appear and gradually swept the country, is the cultural preparation for the emergence of the 17-years mass group dance.

After the Yan 'an rectification, the New Yangko spreaded in the Soviet area in China. When new China was established, people needed a new form to adapt to the new life. The occurrence and popularity of a certain thing must be in line with a certain quality of popular psychology. New Yangko became the old form. However, the development of things is not static, and the development of mass dance to today is the result of continuous innovation, change, and continuous forward promotion. The emergence of mass group dance followed some simple Yangko step elements in Yan 'an New Yangko dance, combined with the theme of workers, peasants and soldiers, simple and easy to learn, and became the expression of people's inner joy in the new era. It can be seen that the mass group dance has continued the theme of workers, peasants and soldiers in the Yan 'an period on the dance theme, and has a joyful mood after liberation on a certain basis.

First of all, the Yan'an New Yangko Movement has pushed the originally neglected mass dance activities to the front stage. Since ancient times, mass dance activities have naturally multiplied among the people and received little attention from mainstream culture. Yan'an New Yangko Movement's success made the communist party of China realize the power of mass art revolution, “created a mass art and political interaction mode”(SUN, 2023 ), made mass dance activities got unprecedented attention. This is the cultural preparation of 17-years mass group dance.

Secondly, the art form of Yan'an Yangko dance was directly absorbed

for reference by the 17-years mass group dance. “Yangko dance elements are widely used in group dance. Among the 97 group dance works collected by the author, 28% of them use the movements of Yangko elements.”(WEI, 2022) In the New Yangko dance, hexagonal grinding, lanterns, hexagonal eight characters and other formations as well as many dance movements have directly entered the 17-years mass group dance, become the sun pattern and flower pattern group dance composition form. For example, in the mass group dance work *Yangko Group Dance* collected by Beijing Working People's Cultural Palace, the specific content of this work is recorded through the way of field notes and action text descriptions. The dance begins with Yangko steps, which are lively and cheerful, with a relaxed and lively atmosphere. With the mass group dance work *Carnival Dance* collected by the Beijing Working People's Cultural Palace, accompanied by the lyrics “Let’s sing! let’s dance! how happy the work is finished, everyone come on” (Beijing, 1959). The dance takes Yangko free step as the starting movement, in order to set off the free and happy atmosphere also inserted shuttlecock-like action; In the mass group dance work *Lyric Dance*, Yangko dance cross step, Yangko free step and other elements are also adopted. In the mass group dance work *Spring Outing*, the last two bars of the dance also used Yangko free steps. In *Chinese Group Dance No. 2* edited by Fei Ye, the mass group dance work *Sky in the Liberated Area*, which was performed at the Beijing People's Sports Congress, uses the free Yangko step as the basic dance step. In the second and third sections of the dance, they perform the free Yangko step respectively to form a big circle, so that everyone looks at each other and maintains the whole unity. In the group dance work *Yangko Dancing*, the dance takes Yangko three steps and one backward step, Yangko free step and Yangko cross step as the basic steps. The group dance work *Happy Dance* also takes the free step of Yangko as the basic step, and expresses the happy mood of the people as the master through the simple characteristics of farmers. On the one hand, Yangko step is simple and easy to learn, on the other hand, Yangko step is the most common movement around the people, which can make the masses accept and spread to the greatest extent. The movement elements of Yangko dance are applied to the group dance to show people's joy and physical expression after work in the new era.

### 3.3 The promotion of the government:

The government's promotion is also an important reason for the popularity of 17-years mass group dance activities. First of all, the Ministry

of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the All-China Federation of Labour Unions, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League and other government departments and social organizations have successively launched a series of policy documents to promote mass cultural activities including group dance. Such as *About the Festival, Spring Festival Mass Propaganda Work and Literary Work Instructions* (1949), *About the Consolidation and Strengthening the Cultural Center, Station Work Instructions* (1953), *About Strengthening Factories, the Site, Enterprise Culture and Art Work Instructions*(1954), *About to Cooperate with the Rural Cultural Work Instructions* (1956), and so on.

These policy documents have played an important role in promoting the prosperity of new China's mass culture and promoting the rapid development of group dance activities. Secondly, the government has set up mass art galleries, cultural centers, workers' cultural palaces and other physical institutions to promote group dance activities. Mass art museums and cultural centers are affiliated to the cultural departments of the government. They are mainly responsible for implementing the mass cultural policies of the government cultural departments, popularizing dance knowledge for the masses, offering training courses, and enriching the amateur cultural life of the masses. The workers' cultural palace is oriented to the workers of factories and mines, and organizes them to carry out literary and artistic activities on the basis of not hindering their production and life, so as to enrich their amateur cultural life. These entities provide the organizational basis for the development of group dance activities. Thirdly, the government provides a platform for group dance performance through *The National Staff Art Performance* and *The National Coal Mine Workers Amateur Art Performance*. The guidance and promotion of the government is an important reason for the rapid development of mass group dance in the seventeen years.

### 3.4 The cultural gene of circular composition:

The original gene of the circle dance. Circle dance is the common original gene of human society. For the primitive people, the form of circle dance can not only “obtain collective cohesion through the form of hand hoop”(WANG, 2014), but also “distinguish the sacred scope from the secular existence”(Susan, 1986). Ancient Mexican Nava performed religious rituals, Kigans in eastern Brazil danced around branches, California Indians liked to dance around pits, and ancient Greeks danced during grape season.

In Chinese history, *Stomping Song*, recorded in the time of Yao, is a form

of circle dance. Until the Song Dynasty, there was still the custom that “men and women getting together singing and dancing”(LU, 1979). Many ethnic minorities in China have retained and continued the dance form of circle dance. For example, the Yi people “jump the moon”, the white horse people dance “circle of fire” and so on. The mass group dance in the 17-years period inherited the cultural gene of the original dance, and can achieve the purpose of strengthening the public collective consciousness.

Influence of traditional Chinese aesthetics thought. The composition form of circle in the 17-years of mass group dance is influenced by the traditional aesthetic concept of circle, and the overall composition structure presents the characteristics of harmony, symmetry and balance. Circle is an important significance in Chinese culture.

In the ancient image of the circle represents the harmony and circulation of the universe. The circle garden architecture becomes a symbol of harmony between human and nature. Round lanterns, moon cakes, dumplings and other round food are symbols of family harmony, which show the important values in traditional culture. There are many movements and postures in Chinese classical dance. The 17-years mass group dance inherits the traditional Chinese aesthetic gene of circle, and takes the circle as the main composition mode. In the dance, the dancers dance together (AZCÁRATE, 2023).

The dancers can feel the strength of the collective in the interaction. From the initial reverence for "spherical heaven" to the creation of circles in various art forms, Chinese people have experienced the process of transforming “the mystery of the universe into their own personal experience, and then transforming this life experience into a kind of profound artistic activity”(WU, 2013).

### 3.5 The influence of foreign cultures:

The emergence of the 17-years mass group dance is also the imitation of foreign group dance and ballroom dance. Due to political and historical reasons, the development of dance in the 17-years was greatly influenced by the Soviet Union, Hungary and other socialist countries. *The Collective Farm Dance* published in 1953 wrote: “Now, our country factories, schools, rural, troops and organs are extensive recreational activities. It’s very important to introduce collective dance from the Soviet union, Hungary, Romania”(Uzkinova & XU, 1953). At that time, there were several publications on foreign group dance and ballroom dance in China, such as *Countries group Dance* (Entertainment Press, 1952), *Group Farm Dance* (Beixin Publishing House, 1953), *Hungarian Group Dance* (Entertainment Press,

1953), and so on.

Take the group farm dance in the Soviet Union as an example. This foreign group dance is performed by young men and women, and the dance style is relaxed and pleasant. The more common form is the male and female dance, which follows the curve and circular movement route when dancing between the dance partners. This kind of performance form can be seen everywhere in the 17-years mass group dance in China. At that time, Chinese mass group dance learned from foreign group dance and ballroom dance in terms of movement form, pace and overall composition.

#### 4. THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF 17-YEARS MASS GROUP DANCE

##### 4.1 Integration

Mass group dance helps to create a collective cultural atmosphere, and plays the function of social integration in the historical period when the new China was just established. From the perspective of the masses, the new China has just been established, which can meet the needs of cultural life and express the joy of restoring a new life. From the perspective of the government, group dance can not only create a collective cultural atmosphere, but also unify individual understanding, transform the ideas of the masses, and form a joint force for the construction of new China.

##### 4.2 Guide

Accumulated the successful experience of Yan'an New Yangko, the Communist Party of China realized the effectiveness of using mass dance as the breakthrough point to guide the construction of mass culture, and then realize the political orientation function, and gradually formed the theory about the construction of mass culture.

During the 17-years, the Communist Party of China consciously took group dance as an effective means to guide new China to establish a new social order. Use group dance to guide the masses of workers and peasants to accept socialist values, establish collectivism concepts, establish new norms of social behavior.

##### 4.3 Inheriting

The circular choreography widely used in the 17-years mass group dance is the inheritance and innovation of the traditional folk dance culture. As

mentioned above, the circular composition of group dance movement itself is the cohesion of traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts and the continuation of traditional dance culture.

The cultural symbol of this traditional dance is presented in the widely popular group dance activities, and the national traditional culture is inherited in a subtle way. At the same time, the composition of group dance has also developed on the basis of circular symbols, both the double circle of dance, and the changing sun pattern and flower pattern, which reflects the innovation of group dance. In addition, the directors integrated some simple folk dance vocabulary into the group dance, making the group dance at that time shows Chinese characteristics and the most popular form.

## 5. CONCLUSION

17-years mass group dance is the result of the changes in the social structure and social physiology. It's the continuation of the New Yangko Movement and is promoted by the government. Also, it's the result of foreign culture influence. Mass group dance helps to create a collective cultural atmosphere, establish new norms of social behavior in new China.

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