

A Comparative Study of Argentine Tango and Chinese Yangge

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Abstract

Tango is the soul of Argentinean, and it is indiscernible from Argentinean and Argentinean's culture and history. Chinese Yangge is also the soul of Chinese national culture. Although tango and yangge are in different countries, they have a lot in common. With the development of society, the two similar art forms have dramatic differences in its development. Tango is accepted by the people of all countries, while yangge faces its development obstacles at present. In this paper, we have a brief comparison between yangge and tango and argue that what caused their difference at present.

Key words: Argentinean tango; Chinese yangge; Cultural and artistic features; Comparative study

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INTRODUCTION

Tango is a dance that has influences from European and African culture. Dances from the candombe ceremonies of former slave people helped shape the modern day Tango. The dance originated in lower-class districts of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The music derived from the fusion

of various forms of music from Europe. The first time the term "tango" to be used seems in connection with the dance in the 1890s. Initially it was just one of the many dances, but soon became popular throughout society, as theatres and street barrel organs spread it from the suburbs to the working-class slums, which were packed with hundreds of thousands of European immigrants, primarily Italians, Spanish and French.

In the early years of the 20th century, dancers and orchestras from Buenos Aires travelled to Europe, and the first European tango craze took place in Paris, soon followed by London, Berlin, and other capitals. Towards the end of 1913 it hit New York in the USA, and Finland. In the USA around 1911 the word "tango" was often applied to dances in a 2/4 or 4/4 rhythm such as the one-step. The term was fashionable and did not indicate that tango steps would be used in the dance, although they might be. Tango music was sometimes played, but at a rather fast tempo. Instructors of the period would sometimes refer to this as a "North American tango", versus the so-called "Argentine Tango". By 1914 more authentic tango styles were soon developed, along with some variations like Albert Newman's "Minuet" tango.

In Argentina, the onset in 1929 of the Great Depression, and restrictions introduced after the overthrow of the Hipólito Yrigoyen government in 1930 caused tango to decline. Its fortunes were reversed as tango became widely fashionable and a matter of national pride under the government of Juan Perón. Tango declined again in the 1950s as a result of economic depression and the banning of public gatherings by the military dictatorships; male-only Tango practice – the custom at the time – was considered "public gathering". That, indirectly, boosted the popularity of rock and roll because, unlike Tango, it did not require such gatherings.

As the Argentine tango in South America is popular around the world, there is also such a form of dance called yangge in East Asia, China. Yangge is a popular rural folk

dance in China for thousands of years. It is originated from Song Dynasty (960-1279). At first it was a singing activity when the farmers in north China set out the young sprouts in the rice fields. Also, it has some connections with ancient eulogy songs sung in sacrifice to the God of the Farm. Yangge has different characteristics and styles in different areas and it is the representative form of the folk dance. As a folk art, it is very popular in China especially in the Spring Festival and Lantern Festival. Crowds of people go on street in the evening and dance together in a line or in a circle head-to-tail. Some dancers dress up in red or green or any colorful costumes, and typically use a red silk ribbon around the waist and swing the body to music played by drum and trumpet. When the yangge team dances along the street or in the square, more and more people will join in. In different areas yangge has different styles, each distinguished by different manipulations of the silk handkerchiefs and different movements of the feet. But they all express the happiness of the people. The Chinese yangge has its wax and wane in history. A point that marks the beginning of a new period of time of yangge is the Chinese Communist Party adopted the dance as a means of rallying village support in 1940s, and is sometimes known as "reform yangge".

The two forms of dance, more specifically, folk dance, Argentine tango and Chinese yangge, share a lot in common. It is very meaningful to have a comparative study of them. Firstly, they are all created by the working people living at the foot of the social ladder. They choose such a kind of dance to express themselves although they are in different continent. Secondly, after thousands or hundreds of years' development, they do not disappear. On the contrary, they are handed down and accepted by people of all ages and social background. Thirdly, nowadays, Tango is popular around the world; however, there is still a long way for yangge to be accepted by the world. Today, we are living in a commercial society and these old folk arts become the common wealth of mankind.

1. STYLES OF ARGENTINE TANGO AND CHINESE YANGGE

The Tango consists of a variety of styles that developed in different regions and areas of Argentina as well as in other locations around the world. The dance developed in response to many cultural elements, such as the crowding of the venue and even the fashions in clothing. The styles are mostly danced in either open embrace, where lead and follow have space between their bodies, or close embrace, where the lead and follow connect either chest-to-chest (Argentine tango) or in the upper thigh, hip area (American and International tango).

Salon-style tango is usually danced with an upright body position, and can be danced in an open or a close position, either the close or open position. Salon-style

is characterized by both partners staying on their own axis, and by maintaining a flexible embrace that allows for rotations of the hips of both partners. Dancers must remain aware of the line of dance all times. Salon-style tango is usually danced to the strongly-accented beats of tango music played in 4 by 4 times.

Milonguero-style tango is usually danced in a close embrace, with a slightly leaning posture. Partners must maintain constant upper body contact throughout the entire dance, even during turns. While some instructors of the style will instruct dancers to lean against each other, others prefer that partners maintain their own balance. Dancers should lean forward only enough to remain in the embrace. This embrace is often referred to as *apilado*.

Club-style tango is a mixture of the salon and milonguero styles of tango. Club-style is danced in a close embrace, with partners loosening their embrace during turns. Club-style tango is danced with an upright posture.

The term *orillero* means "tango from the outskirts of the city." *Orillero*-style tango can be danced in either the open or close embrace, although it is mostly performed in open embrace, allowing both dancers to make steps outside of the embrace. Many people agree that *orillero*-style tango is one of the easiest to master.

Tango *canyengue* is a historical form of the dance that originated in the 1920's and 1930's. This style is danced in close embrace, with dancers typically moving with bent knees to allow for smaller steps. Body movements are exaggerated in order to accent the small steps.

Tango *nuevo* (new tango) developed as a style upon careful analysis of the basic structural movements of tango dancing, and the discovery of new step combinations. Tango *nuevo* is danced in an open, loose embrace in an upright posture, and each dancer must maintain his or her own axis. This style can be performed with traditional tango music or more contemporary, non-tango music.

Fantasia (show tango) is danced in tango stage shows. *Fantasia*, which combines several different tango styles, is danced in open embrace. This style of tango is characterized by exaggerated movements and "extra" dance elements not usually associated with basic social tango. The additional movements are often taken from the dance style of ballet.

Ballroom tango developed from Argentine tango styles, but was modified to fit into the category of ballroom dancing. Ballroom tango incorporates different techniques than the smooth, Argentine dances. Tango is considered as one of the easiest of the ballroom dance styles, making it a great choice for beginners. Ballroom tango is divided into two categories, American Style and International Style. Each of these styles is considered to be a social and competitive dance, but International Style is generally used more often in ballroom competitions.

Yangge comes in different styles according to areas or its form, for example, the Guzi Yangge in Shangdong, the

Yangge in northern Shanxi, the Ground Yangge in Hebei, Beijing and Liaoning, the Manchurian Yangge and the Stilts Yangge. Let us focus on some major styles in China.

The Changli Ground Yangge is one of the most representative local folk dances, popular in eastern Hebei Province. The roles in Ground Yangge include niu (girls), chou (clown), gongzi (young men) and laokuai (shrewish old women). Except for laokuai, who hold a wooden club, all others dance with a folding fan in their hands. The most interesting role is the chou, who is naïve, kind, humorous and optimistic, making the audience burst into laughter from time to time.

The Guzi Yangge is one of the three Yangge forms in Shangdong Province, originated in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1270) and prevailed during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911). It is very popular in rural areas of Shanghe and Huimin, especial during the Spring Festival and other holidays. The performers are well organized and carefully divided. The Yangge team is usually composed of over 40 performers, who are divided into five roles: santou (umbrella), guzi (drum), bangchui (stick), lahua (flower) and chou (clown), each with its unique appeal. For example, guzi is bold and unconstrained, bangchui is as spry as a cricket, and lahua is quick and neat.

Jiaozhou Yangge is also one of the three yangge forms in Shangdong Province and known as Ground Yangge. It originated in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). It is a collective dance usually composed of dozens of performers, who are divided into six roles: gaoyaoke, cuihua, shannv, xiaochou, bangchui and guzi. The dance reflects the particular countryside charm.

Haiyang Dayangge is another yangge forms in Shangdong Province. It is a collective folk dance incorporating songs, dances and operas. This form has a distinct local flavor and is composed of three parts: the leaders, the music band and the dancers. It is grand in scale and comprised of solo dancers, pas de deux and group dancers, performing thing such as riding a donkey and rowing a land boat, with lively, interesting and lifelike plots (ZHU, 2008).

In northern Shaanxi Province, the yangge is called “Nao yangge”. The yangge team dance either in large groups of dozen to a hundred people, or in two or three-person groups. The santou (leading performer) must be good at singing traditional songs and composing new songs to respond to different occasions. When he sings, the others will repeat his last sentence. It reflects the simple, honest and optimistic personality of the local people.

2. ARTISTIC FEATURES OF ARGENTINE TANGO AND CHINESE YANGGE

Early music of Argentine tango has adopted the rhythm of Milonga and Habanera, which is characterized by a

lively 2/4 tempo. The form of music is always ternary form and it mixed sadness and happiness in melody. It is because that the early tango music was mostly composed by the musicians who had little formal music education, so most of their works were originated from social life. At that time, Buenos Aires, as the cradle of Argentine tango, were packed with hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Here they suffer from the lack of the orientation, the melancholy of being far away from their hometown and the burdensomeness of starting up a new enterprise. Although under that burden they still inextinguishably long for a bright future. There were no fixed playing instruments at that time; violin, flute and guitar were the most common from. From the 1920s, tango music appeared 4/4 or 4/8 tempo in rhythm. The form of music turned from ternary form to binary form, in which the B section is usually substantially longer than the A section. The melody of music has slowly turned to sad, mournful and lyric (TIAN, 2010). It seems to express the people's twisting desires that are inexpressible, which related to the hardness of the immigrant's life. Meanwhile, as a multi-cultural nation and with the spreading and exchange of the different cultures, more musical instruments have introduced into Argentine, and then the main instruments of tango become piano, violin and bandoneón.

Tango dance appeared in small bars which was a “battle” for men to win the love of women, so the dancers were men at first. Later women participated in it. The most distinguished feature of steps of Argentine tango is that the flexible and complexity positions of their movements of legs of the dancers. The famous dancer Pablo Vallone once argue that although tango has different meanings to different person, they all find the thing they have wanted for a long time in tango. There is no special movement in the upper part of body. The dancer's face looks serious and they have no communication in language. But we could see vigilant, sentimental, firmness and hope from their eyes. More importantly, our eyes are dazzling by the complexity movements of legs, crossing, turning, jumping and kicking. The dance likes a love story and packed with the dancer's emotion that move all the audience. The tango dancer, especially the women, wear very little and fashionable cloth. The tango costumes are designed following the world trend and it can fully satisfy modern women's demand for fashion. And the changes of component elements of dresses promote the change and development of emotion and aesthetic forms of tango.

The songs of Argentine tango developed slowly as it is limited by the language. The early tango songs were mainly about the hardship life of the working people. As the development of the society and the living standards of the people, tango songs become a popular music in city in 1930s. Because Argentine is a nation with multi-culture, so the lyric of tango songs are fused with many dialogues and foreign languages. It also adopts many

rhetorical devices which makes the songs lively and fresh. Additionally, many artists contribute to the changes of tango. The most prominent figure in the history of tango is Carlos Gardel who is called "the king of tango". His masterpiece is *Mi Buenos Aires Querido*. His contribution to tango lies in his changing tango from a solo dance to a genre of songs with cultural meaning. For many, he embodied the soul of the tango style. It is he who makes the tango become popular in France and then spread all over the world.

If you do not want to spend money in watching tango in the theatre, you also can appreciate it in the park. You always can encounter several aged people gather together singing the old tango music while taking a walk in the park on the weekends. With one accordion player, couples of singers, the crowd seem to be resonated with the singers. They burst out of clapping whenever the songs come to the climax part.

Chinese yangge is of unique region characteristic and cultural tradition of the nation. Take Shandong yangge for example, the music is sincere, plain, melody and euphemism. The rhythm of the yangge music is 2/4 tempo and it has slow clapper and rapid clapper. The rhythm of slow clapper is adagio but not dilatory, while the rapid clapper is energetic but not sharp. This kind of yangge music aims to express people's love of life and dreams of a happy future through praising the beautiful hometown. Different from Argentine tango, the instruments of Chinese yangge are typically national, such as suona, drum, gong and erhu. The music is typical Chinese national vocality, for example, *Jiangjun Ling*, *Desheng Ling* and so on. In China, we are used to the concepts of grand unification. It is not easy for the foreigner culture to integrate with the Chinese culture. Therefore, unlike Argentine tango's multi-cultural elements, yangge has retained many aspects of the ancient pure and fresh Chinese culture consistently.

A yangge team may range from dozens to hundreds. Each dancer has his own character and function in the whole team. Generally, each village has one yangge team which is organized by the elder or the respected person. The dance of yangge is focus on tweaking, grinding and stretching. The male dancers are required to show men's steady and vigorous, while the female dancers should perform women's elegant and graceful which stresses the flexibility of the waist. The movements of the male dancer are mostly concentrated in the lower half of the body, such as jumping, half squat, on all fours and fall on knees (LI, 2005).

Chinese yangge has librettos. Male dancer and female dancers can communicate in language except movements. However, most of their librettos are about flirtations. We can see that both yangge and tango are including the basic elements of human beings – sex. The folk dance created by the working people in different culture backgrounds shares the same characteristics. In our world,

all the sentiments and expressions of humanity, from the debasing to the angelic, are part of our culture and no one can avoid this. And as mass culture, it usually expresses the nature of human. So whatever races and culture backgrounds, we could hear some same voices from their local music and dance.

Chinese yangge is an important art form for the people to celebrate the traditional festival and harvest. It is much more a kind of collective activity, the more people participate, the more influences it has. Nowadays, we can appreciate yangge either in square or any other open air performance, which is quite close to real life.

3. CULTURAL FEATURES OF ARGENTINA TANGO AND CHINESE YANGGE

Yo-yo ma, a famous Chinese American cellist, once marked, "Tango is not just a dance; it is like an undercurrent music that comes from the abyss. During the evolution course in Argentina, tango has become the soul of the country." Argentinean tango has full-bodied cultural features: Each dance has its own characteristic and setting. For example: the romance of Waltz, the zealotry of rock-and-roll and the warm, carnival-like ambience of samba, and cheerful Chinese yangge. Tango, despite its fame of gloom, combines all the above features together, integrating the enthusiasm, flirtation and profoundness into one. As each dance has a corresponding cultural characteristic, Argentinean tango also embodies the Argentinean character which is indiscernible from Argentinean's culture and history.

The unique geographical and living environment cultivates Argentinean's enthusiastic and out-expressive for praising lives, which characterize Argentina tango. Then we can find that Argentine tango is high enthusiasm and full intoxication. Argentine tango is idea flex and fancy-free. Argentina, after becoming a democratic state in 1912, offers its people more freedom and influenced tango. The Argentinean lower class enjoys tango and high ranked class also holds tango party as a fashion. The upper-class of Buenos Aires sprang up several of tango salons. This upsurge quickly spread from South America to New York, London and Paris where people participated passionately. And then tango becomes popular all over the world.

Additionally, the development of the modern technique contributes to the spread of tango. For example, in the 20th century, the radio has accelerated the popularity of tango. According to the daily La Nacion newspaper, "the big party in 1950s in Argentina, people could not hear anything else but the tango music from radio." "Newspapers, photos, movies, records and radio programs... then the Argentina's tango came into stage, extend from dance to music and reached the summit of its influence and achievements. Tango is the production of mass culture." (Hobsbawm, 1995). At the same time, the tango in the movie *Scent of*

a Woman and the tango records published by the famous singer Julio Lglesias were all accelerated the population of tango in the world. Now, tango is not only transmission by radio, records and movies, it depends on much more modern media means to produce in quantity and spread in the world. Each year, there are many professional dancers dance tango in theater for people to appreciate. The dancing school and organizations which focus on teaching tango are also springing up all over the world.

The development of tango is more market-oriented and professional. According to Economy Reference: Tango has achieved remarkable economic results, in Buenos Aires, tango and its relevant industries have yielded integrated economic benefits of more than 450 million dollars each year, its ratio of the entertainment consumption reached to 10% in the city. In some large tango theater, they need to hire choreographers, dancers and performers which expand employment and give an impetus to relevant industries. Such “tango economic” is growing at about 25 percent a year. Through the market-oriented and capital operation, Argentinean tango gets a very fast development and become a popular music and dance. The government also participated in such a movement to spread tango. In 1974, the Argentinean government decreed that tango in all music programs in radio and TV should take up 1/3 at least. In 1989, the Argentinean president himself participate a tango benefit performance in Buenos Aires, this behavior has pushed the movement of tango preservation to a climax. Today, there is no need for government to spread tango, the marketing promotion has successfully spread tango and make it become popular in the world. Especially in Finland, its Tango Art Festival has attracted more than 100 thousand people to participate every year, ranking first in the world.

The popularity of tango in the world not only attracts foreigners to learn tango, but also makes Argentinean rethink tango again. “In the 1970s, the young people prefer rock music to tango. However, the people who are fond of tango are mostly young man now.” the economist Marchini who is focus on the tango development said, “The foreign tourists’ affection for tango has aroused the Argentineans’ enthusiasm for their national culture.”

Although the Chinese are very implicit and conservative to show ourselves, they are bold and ardent when dancing yangge. The dance steps are exaggerative and the music is full intoxication. Although it has some fix roles, such as chou, santou (umbrella), guzi (drum), bangchui (stick) and lahua (flower), people could express themselves freely through playing those roles. Every role has its function which is connected to the people’s daily life closely and the exaggerate way of dancing expressed their yearnings for happiness. Both tango and yangge, no matter their forms or their contents, they are sensuous

and gratifying to our aesthetic sense. Their enthusiasm transmitted to the audience and infected everyone with the zeal for dancing. Through dancing yangge, Chinese people can blow off their repressed emotion. People either in Argentine or in China choose such kind of enthusiasm dances to express their emotion; no matter they are sad or happy. It is the human nature that they both choose a very enthusiasm dance to release their emotion although in different countries and culture backgrounds.

Yangge has different purpose in different areas. For example, in the country, it usually perform in the slack farming season, Spring Festival, as a form people used to offer sacrifices to heaven and earth to which expresses their gratitude for its favors in ancient times. Unlike yangge in countries, the yangge in cities is usually an exercise. Most of the dancers are middle-aged or elderly women, who dance yangge happily while accompanied by tape recorders, gongs and drums in squares. Their main purpose is to exercise and keep healthy by dancing the yangge. When we think of yangge, the most impressed sight may be those colorfully dressed elderly ladies doing the yangge to the loud rhythmic music of cymbals and drums in China. No matter in countries or in cities, people are always spontaneously participating in the dance. It appears commercial operated yangge team now. There are two forms of commercialization: the village yangge team and the enterprise yangge team, they all take yangge as a means of economic benefits. In addition, in order “to use culture to set up the stage and the economy to put on a show”, the local government often use yangge to enliven the economy (ZHANG, 2008). Although yangge has paved its way to commercialization, it still has not a complete industrial chain. So it still belongs to regional and spontaneous mass movements.

CONCLUSION

During human historical evolution course, the appearance of dance and music is closely related to the human culture. Argentine tango and Chinese yangge, which are all created by the working people live at the foot of the social ladder, have dramatically similarities although they are popular in different continents. They are the common fortune of human beings. Tango and yangge, their fantastic melodies and dances enable people to experience the wonderful world and life. Folk art is the crystallization of human wisdom and experience which reflect the distinctive tastes and sentiments, social customs and mental outlook of the working people around the world. Both tango and yangge have enriched human’s inner life. Only by turning to the folklore of peoples, probing into its meanings and functions, and searching for links between different bodies of tradition may we hope to understand the intellectual and spiritual life of man in its broadest dimension.

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