



# A comparative study of the music and dance culture of the western regions from the northern dynasties to the sui dynasty and the tang dynasty in the context of the silk road

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**Abstract.** By comparing the music and dance cultures of the Western regions from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, this paper explores the deep intermingling of Chinese and Western cultures in the context of the Silk Road and its manifestation in the art of music and dance. The music and dance in the period from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty mainly showed the influence of religious ceremonies and national life, while the Tang Dynasty reached the peak of cultural exchanges, and the art of music and dance was more diversified, and the fusion of foreign cultures with the Chinese culture was closer. Through comparative analyses of the types of music and dance, the use of musical instruments, and the costumes of the dancers in the two periods, this paper reveals the important role of the Silk Road in promoting the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, and highlights the significance of the art of music and dance as a cultural heritage. This comparative study not only provides us with an in-depth understanding of the evolution of Chinese and Western cultures in different historical periods, but also provides historical reference for contemporary cultural and artistic creations.

**Keywords:** Silk Road; Music and Dance Arts; Cultural Heritage

## 1 Introduction

Since ancient times, the Silk Road has been an important channel of cultural exchange between the East and the West, connecting China with the civilisations of Central Asia, West Asia and even further afield. Not only were commodities circulated along this historic trade route, but culture and the arts also took on new life in the intermingling. The period from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties was a key period of cultural diversity and artistic prosperity in Chinese history. Especially during the Tang Dynasty, Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), as the political, economic and cultural centre of the time, attracted a large number of emissaries, merchants and artists

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from Central Asia, Persia and India, creating a diverse cultural scene. During this period, the culture of music and dance developed in a rich and varied manner, profoundly influencing the aesthetic consciousness of society and culture, and becoming a vivid microcosm of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries.

This study explores the similarities and differences between the music and dance cultures of the Western Regions from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty in the context of the Silk Road, focusing on the differences in the types of music and dance, the use of musical instruments, and the forms of expression of cultural exchanges between the two. Through the comparison of archaeological data and images, it reveals the evolution of music and dance art and its cultural connotation in the two periods. An in-depth understanding of the profound impact of Silk Road cultural exchanges on the art of Chinese music and dance can provide us with an important perspective on the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. Analysing the inheritance and change of music and dance in history, we can understand the diversity and inclusiveness of music and dance as cultural heritage, which can provide inspiration and reference for contemporary art creation and cultural research.

## **2 Related Work**

### **2.1 Current status of Domestic and Foreign Research**

The Silk Road is not only a trade route for the circulation of goods, but also a link for the deep exchange of culture between the East and the West. Most of the early research on the Silk Road focused on material culture, such as the trade of silk and spices. However, with the growing number of archaeological discoveries, the Silk Road, as a conduit for cultural dissemination and integration, has garnered extensive attention. Scholars, both domestic and international, have successively examined how Western cultures were introduced to China through the Silk Road and how Chinese culture influenced the arts and religions of countries along the route.

In recent years, with the application of digital technology, researchers at home and abroad have further explored the expression of music and dance art and its cultural connotations through 3D modelling, big data analysis and other means. The research on music and dance art along the Silk Road has achieved extensive results, especially on cultural exchange and art dissemination in the context of the Silk Road. Foreign scholars paid attention to the interaction and spread of Chinese and Western cultures earlier, and they analysed the influence of the Silk Road on the music and dance arts of the East and the West from the perspectives of anthropology and art history. For example, Chang [1] studied how the cultures of Central Asia, Persia and India were introduced to China through the Silk Road by examining the sites along the Silk Road. The study explores the migration of artistic elements in cross-cultural exchanges and how these foreign cultures were localised in China.

In contrast, domestic scholars focus more on combining archaeological discoveries and historical documents to conduct systematic research on the specific expressions, origins and development of ancient music and dance arts. Wang et al. [2] focus on the dissemination and development of music and dance in the Western regions during the

Tang Dynasty, but the systematic study of music and dance art is insufficient, especially the analysis of cross-cultural exchanges combined with archaeological discoveries needs to be in-depth. Through the analysis of excavated artifacts and tomb murals, Zhang [3] conducted a detailed analysis of Tang dynasty court music and dance, but the study focused on a single historical period and a single form of music and dance art, with relatively few comparative studies across time. This paper reveals the evolution trajectory of music and dance art in the Central Plains under different historical periods through comparative research.

## **2.2 Current Status of Research on Music and Dance Culture from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang Dynasties**

The music and dance culture from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang Dynasties occupies an important position in Chinese history, which is not only the embodiment of the prosperity of art, but also a vivid microcosm of the cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

The period from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty marked the initial phase of the intermingling of Chinese music and dance culture with that of the Western regions, with music and dance primarily intertwined with religious ceremonies and ethnic traditions. The music and dance expressed the lifestyles of Xianbei, Xiongnu and other ethnic groups, and the dance style was mainly rough and dynamic. Wei [4] and others studied how Western culture spread through Buddhism by analysing tomb murals, sculptures and excavated artefacts, revealing the characteristics of music and dance art influenced by Western culture in this period

In recent years, with the archaeological discoveries in Xi'an and other places, researchers have paid more and more attention to the detailed changes of musical instruments, costumes and dancers' images in Tang dynasty music dances. Although research on the music and dance cultures of the Northern Dynasties to Sui and the Tang Dynasty has achieved remarkable results, systematic comparative studies on these two periods are still relatively scarce. This study explores the evolution of the art of music and dance in the cultural fusion of the Silk Road [5] through a cross-period comparison of music and dance from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties.

## **3 Cultural Exchange and the Art of Music and Dance from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty**

### **3.1 Historical Background**

During the period from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty, China experienced many regime changes, such as the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Qi and Northern Zhou. During this period, political turmoil and cultural diversity co-existed, creating a complex cultural landscape. With the opening of the Silk Road, the cultures of the Western regions were smoothly introduced to the Central Plains, promoting the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. Frequent wars, trade and emissaries

became an important means of cultural fusion. Against this background, the music and dance arts of the Western regions gradually entered the Central Plains and had a profound impact on the music and dance of the time. The prosperity of Buddhism in this period further promoted the spread and development of music and dance culture, making music and dance not only entertainment activities, but also assumed the function of religious ceremonies and became an important form of faith expression.

### **3.2 Dance**

The music and dance from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui period were mainly performed in religious ceremonies, ritual activities and court celebrations. Due to the flourishing of Buddhism, music and dance were often used in religious ceremonies such as Buddhist pujas. These dances often conveyed religious emotions and beliefs through vivid gestures and rich body language. For example, in the murals and terracotta figurines of Northern Wei tombs, the dancers show dynamic postures that display a strong sense of rhythm and vivid body language, reflecting the exuberant qualities of the grassland people's culture. The dancers' movements often emphasise strength and vitality, reflecting the lifestyle and beliefs of the Xianbei and Xiongnu peoples. These music and dances were not only part of religious ceremonies, but also an important part of social culture, enriching the cultural expression of the Northern Dynasties to Sui period.

### **3.3 Musical Instruments**

The Silk Road, as a major channel of cultural exchange between the East and the West, not only promoted the trade of commodities, but also brought the introduction of various musical instruments. During the Northern Dynasties, the musical cultures of the northern minorities had a significant impact on the composition of musical instruments in the Central Plains. The combination of musical instruments in this period is relatively simple, but the instruments influenced by the Western culture occupy an important position in the music and dance. For example, archaeological discoveries of instruments that appear frequently in Northern Wei burial murals, such as the pipa, the sheng, the transverse flute, and the drum, show clear similarities to Western instruments. These instruments not only reflect the exchange of Chinese and Western instrumental technology, but also enhance the expressive power of music and dance. In the process of combining foreign instruments with local musical forms, unique musical styles arose. For example, the pipa, an important instrument whose playing techniques and styles were developed during this period, was commonly used to accompany religious dances and court celebrations. The diversity and technological innovation of the instrument added rich tones and emotions to the performance of music and dance, making the music and art of this period more diversified and complex in expression.

### **3.4 Costumes**

The costumes of dancers from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty were mainly influenced by the Western regions and the grassland peoples in the north, with loose

robes and narrow-sleeved designs, displaying a simple and practical aesthetic. The design of the dancers' costumes emphasised functionality, aiming to enable the dancers to display free and fluid movements during their performances, in order to enhance the expressiveness and spectacle of the dance. Such costumes not only reflect the cultural characteristics of the northern steppe peoples, but also the importance that society attached to dance performance at that time. The image of the dancers often shows a bold and dynamic temperament through the matching of body language and costumes, adding visual appeal to the performance of music and dance. Although cultural exchanges during this period had not yet formed a long-term stable situation, the costumes of the dancers and the expression of dance art laid the foundation for the subsequent cultural prosperity of the Tang Dynasty.

With the establishment of the Tang Dynasty and the stabilisation of society, the culture of music and dance developed more widely, demonstrating a richer phenomenon of cultural integration.

## **4 Cultural Peaks and the Prosperity of Music and Dance in the Tang Dynasty**

### **4.1 Historical Background**

The Tang Dynasty was the pinnacle of cultural exchanges along the Silk Road. Chang'an (now Xi'an), as a world-class political, economic and cultural centre at that time, attracted emissaries, merchants and artists from Central Asia, Persia, Arabia and India. Against this backdrop, the Tang Dynasty not only embraced foreign cultures, but also actively integrated and deeply fused them with those of the Central Plains, resulting in a completely new cultural landscape that encompassed a wide range of artistic styles, religious beliefs, and social customs. The Tang government's open policies and tolerance for foreign cultures fostered an environment where diverse cultures could meet and interact, thus promoting the development of art, music, and dance. Chang'an was not only a meeting point of cultures, but also a link for cultural exchanges among various ethnic groups, laying a solid foundation for the prosperity of the art of music and dance. With the frequent trade and exchanges, the social life of the Tang Dynasty gradually showed diversity, and cultural exchange and integration were fully reflected in the music and dance.

### **4.2 Dance**

Dance in the Tang Dynasty absorbed dance elements from Central Asia, Persia, Arabia and India, forming a diversified style. This fusion of cultures made the dance style of the Tang Dynasty richer, with dance movements, music, costumes and performance forms showing obvious foreign influences. There were many kinds of music and dance in the Tang Dynasty, and both court music and folk dance were fully developed, presenting a rich and colourful artistic style. For example, the Dance of Nei Shang and the Dance of Hu Xuan are representative works of Tang Dynasty court music and dance,

reflecting the luxury of court life and the elegance of artistic aesthetics, respectively. The Dance of the Whirligig Dance is particularly typical, known for its fast rotation and distinctive rhythm, and was loved by the nobles and the people of the Central Plains, demonstrating the far-reaching influence of Western culture on Tang society. The folk dances of the Tang Dynasty, on the other hand, were more secular and entertaining, covering more elements of social life and carrying strong colours of foreign cultures. Through the study of these dances, it can be seen that Tang music and dance were not only the embodiment of art, but also a vivid reflection of social customs and cultural exchanges.

### 4.3 Musical Instruments

The Tang Dynasty was rich in musical instruments, covering stringed instruments (such as the zither, pipa, guzheng), wind instruments (such as the flute, xiao, and pipe), and percussion instruments (such as gongs, drums, and cymbals). With the prosperity of the Silk Road, many foreign musical instruments were introduced to the Tang Dynasty, such as the 'Sattar' from Persia and the 'Vihar' from India. The introduction of these instruments enriched the musical system of the Tang Dynasty and promoted the integration of different cultures. The introduction of a large number of foreign instruments made the variety of musical instruments and performance styles more diversified. Regarding the use of musical instruments, the variety and craftsmanship of Tang Dynasty instruments increased dramatically, and their arrangements became more complex and diverse compared to the period from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty. Instruments such as the pipa, sheng, erhu, and drums were widely used during this period and played an important role in performance. The production of musical instruments in the Tang Dynasty not only pursued the perfection of tone, but also focused on the aesthetic elements of design, demonstrating the combination of art and utility. The complexity and variety of musical expressions in the court music and dance, and the concerted performance of many instruments to form a richly layered acoustic effect, fully demonstrated the maturity and prosperity of the Tang Dynasty music and art. Such instrumental performance not only enriches the expressive power of the dance, but also makes the art of music and dance become an important carrier of Chinese and Western cultural exchanges.

### 4.4 Costumes

The costumes of Tang Dynasty dancers were more gorgeous and delicate than those of the Northern Dynasties and Sui Dynasty, and the styles were more diversified. Incorporating more foreign cultural elements, the costume design of the Tang Dynasty became more complex, with common short skirts and cascading cape designs, making the overall look more fashionable and avant-garde. The music and dance costumes of the Tang Dynasty absorbed a large number of foreign cultures from the Silk Road, especially elements from Central Asia and Persia, making the costumes more elaborate and diverse, reflecting the openness and tolerance of the Tang Dynasty. The decorative elements of the costumes were more elaborate, and in addition to tassels and embroidery,

more precious stones, gold and silver threads and other materials were incorporated, adding to the overall sense of luxury. These costumes reflect not only the far-reaching influence of Western culture during the Tang Dynasty but also the deep fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. An analysis of Tang Dynasty dancers' costumes reveals that the cultural diversity and artistic innovation brought by the Silk Road laid the foundation for the dance art of future generations.

## 5 Conclusion

A comparison of the music and dance cultures of the Western Regions between the Northern Dynasties to Sui and the Tang Dynasty reveals that: the music and dance of the Northern Dynasties to Sui were mainly influenced by religious ceremonies and the life of grassland peoples, and the styles were rough and focused on utility; while in the Tang Dynasty, driven by the Silk Road, the integration of cultures reached a peak, and the art of music and dance was more diversified and refined, showing a deep fusion of multiple cultures. The musical instruments, dance costumes, and expressions of the Tang Dynasty reflect a high degree of integration between foreign cultures and those of the Central Plains, in which the Silk Road played a key role. This study reveals the important role of music and dance culture in promoting cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world, and provides useful insights into contemporary cultural heritage protection and artistic innovation, as well as important lessons for cultural heritage transmission.

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