

# The Southern Guangdong Kirin in the Vision of Symbolic Value—Reflections on the Introduction of Kirin Dance into College Classes

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**Abstract:** "Among the various forms and contents of dance, both ancient and modern dances can express a certain degree of cultural significance and beliefs of all times."<sup>[1]</sup> As a kind of folk culture, Kirin is a folk cultural phenomenon formed by customs and practices of the people in Southern Guangdong over a long period of agriculture civilization, which have been blooming during its unique development history. It is a mark and symbol of the people of Southern Canton and has a rich cultural connotation, which can evoke people's memory of the nation and history, and reflects the production mode, cultural awareness and technology level of the time from various aspects.

**Keywords:** The Southern Guangdong Kirin, Symbolic Value, college classes

## 1. Introduction

Kirin dance is widely considered as a kind of folk art in traditional Chinese culture. The Kirin Dance is known to have originated in the Central Plains. The inspiration of its emergence comes from the shape of the imaginary animal Kirin, which represents auspice and peace of the country and the people. Similar to the lion dance, it often appears in festivals and celebrations. The most common Kirin dance in China is thought to have developed from traditional Hakka Kirin dance. Kirin dance, one of the most famous animal-like dances in Southern Guangdong, as a key intangible heritage protection project, is not only a traditional cultural symbol of Hakka, but also has a high aesthetic value of entertainment. This paper will analyze the cultural connotation and symbolic value of Kirin dance respectively in terms of handicraft and folk belief, and further explore how to perfectly integrate traditional dance inheritance with modern teaching methods, so as to increase the possibility of Kirin dance entering professional dance classes in colleges and universities.

## 2. The folklore and cultural connotation of the Kirin

A symbol is a mark or notation of something yet expressing the meaning of a matter in an abstract way. Saussure, one of the founders of semiotics, pointed out that "A sign consists of the signifier and the signified. The signifier being the material construction suggests the expressive side, while the signified being the concept expressed shows the meaningful aspect."<sup>[2]</sup> From the semiotic point of view, cultural heritage is the most representative cultural symbol, and the symbolic meaning of Kirin is the unity of its signifier and signified, the unity of folk art form and its inherent folk cultural value. This highly unique local characteristic contains a rich cultural connotation that is deeply rooted in people's lives and concepts.

The signifier of the Kirin culture can refer to cultural embodiment in the current contemporary consumer society. It is an object of handicrafts as well as a form of folkloric activity used for cheer and entertainment during the festivals of Southern Guangdong. Kirin dance is a folk art integrating dance, acrobatics, music and art crafts. The traditional tying of Kirin props is using the bamboo and wood to make a good skeleton, while paper paste and pen are needed to draw the scale armor. Later on, folk artists started to use colored silk and laser paper making the scale armor become not only colorful but realistic and durable, showing the sophistication of the folk craft. Moreover, the signified of the Kirin culture lies in its cultural value. Its existence distinguishes Southern Guangdong from other places, and the people of Southern Guangdong use it to build their unique regional cultural characteristics and historical identities. The shape of the Kirin is a fantasized animal consisting of a dragon's head, a cow's

tail, a lion's body, a deer's horn, and a goat's hoofs. The unique shape of the Kirin prop not only reflects the dragon culture, but also carries the pursuit of stability and happiness.

### **3. The symbolic value of the Kirin**

Among different social classes, from the north to the south, the Kirin dance has been a rich historical imprint for thousands of years. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the Hakka ancestors were in turmoil looking for a place to make a living. On their way to the south, they brought the Kirin culture to Lingnan and Guangdong, where it has been passed down to this day. The Kirin dance is an expression of their emotions and their desire for a better life, for good weather, and for peace and prosperity. In this process, the Kirin has become an important devotional icon as a sort of folk culture.

#### ***3.1. In folk crafts***

Foshan is the prop production center of the Kirin dance, and the art craft production process has a long history. Contemporary artists made eight major improvements in the production to make the props easier and better to perform. The prop production is very tedious and complex, painted with dragons, phoenixes, eight trigrams and a variety of auspicious objects. These auspicious symbols all reflect the spiritual expectations of the people.

#### ***3.2. In terms of cultural functions***

During the development of Huangge Kirin Dance, under the research of national-level choreographer Mingjing Yang and national-level performer Baokun Chen and other scholars, the Kirin Dance has been deeply excavated and developed, and the local traditional Kirin Dance has been transformed and innovated. On the basis of the competition, the Kirin dance has become a cultural treasure of Huangge, enhancing the cohesion of the people and the aesthetics of the masses, moreover, raising the cultural awareness of the town of Huangge, and making the meaningful side of the symbolic value of the Kirin dance referred to present.

#### ***3.3. In the regional cultural characteristics***

The Qingxi Hakka Kirin Dance has been passed down for more than two hundred years, and the Hakka people have said that "Kirin is auspicious" and "Kirin carries on the family lineage". Legend has been told that on the day Confucius was born, the Kirin brought a jade book in its mouth to his bed. Confucius got this jade book and studied diligently, and finally became a sage who learned a lot and taught his people. This shows that the Hakka ancestors have attached great importance to education and culture, and in the Hakka belief, the Kirin has its deep artistic heritage as a sacred object to spread civilization. Qingxi locals pay great attention to the protection, inheritance and innovation of the cultural heritage of the Kirin dance, and has made the leap from folk to national and then to international stage. Qingxi residents have also made remarkable achievements in the innovation and development of the Kirin dance, and Qingxi has been named "the hometown of Chinese folk culture and art" and "national Kirin dance inheritance base". In 2016, the Guangdong Kirin Cultural Festival was permanently settled in Qingxi, Dongguan, showing the spirit and style of the people in Southern Guangdong and building the regional cultural characteristics of Hakka Kirin Dance.

In this new era, the Kirin is no longer simply a fine work of art, and the Kirin dance is no longer a ritualized form of folklore, but has become a cultural symbol that has high spiritual value of all times of the Southern Cantonese daily lives. The Kirin dance has changed with the rapid development of today's society and the improvement of economic living standards. With the frequent economic and cultural exchanges, Kirin dance has boosted the cultural diversity, symbolizing the group behavior in the process of organizing, practicing and performing, enhancing the collective consciousness, improving the quality of the people, and moreover strengthening the social communication, which is conducive to the stability and harmonious development of society. The development of Kirin dance not only meets the growing material and cultural needs of the people, but also inherits and carries forward the national cultural traditions, and then reflects the cultural and spiritual connotation of people's unity and struggle, continuous progress, and the pursuit of a better life.

The cultural heritage of the Kirin is a historical symbol of Chinese civilization, which together with

other outstanding Chinese cultural heritage forms the cultural foundation of the strong cohesion of the Chinese nation, making it alive and passed on from generation to generation. Only with a certain understanding of the value of Kirin cultural heritage, we can treat this precious historical and cultural symbol correctly and better inherit and develop this excellent folk dance art. The young generation should take up this responsibility without hesitation.

#### **4. The feasibility of Kirin dance in professional dance classes in colleges and universities**

"Any art form is constantly developing and improving, innovating with the passage of time and the new requirements of the people, and the task of art workers is to accelerate its development with their artistic labor."<sup>[1]</sup> Kirin dance has the value of edification and inheritance, as well as the value of entertainment and dance ability. The entry of Kirin dance into college art classes not only taps into the cultural connotation it contains, but also establishes the regional characteristics of college cultural construction.

##### ***4.1. Kirin dance has the value of education and inheritance***

Kirin dance has an educational function. As a carrier of historical culture and folk art form, Kirin dance is unique in China, it is a "living fossil" of ancient folk beliefs and culture, and is a valuable cultural heritage. In addition to learning the basic movements and enriching the classroom content, teaching Kirin dance in college classrooms can also promote students' understanding of Kirin dance and Southern Guangdong culture, which has profound historical and educational significance.

Kirin dance has a heritage value. From the development of Kirin in recent years, there are new changes in its performance content and its form. The rituals of modern Kirin dance are weakened, and the fusion of caiqing and martial arts has become more skillful and ornamental, and the Kirin dance has transformed from the traditional physical fitness and entertainment to a more ornamental stage performance. The large scale performance of Kirin dance during the New Year's Eve has shown its function of gathering people's hearts. Based on the strong performance and the cultural connotation of Kirin dance, the introduction of Kirin dance into the college classroom is not only to enrich the classroom content, but also to pass on and develop the material and spiritual culture carried by Kirin dance for thousands of years.

##### ***4.2. Kirin dance has the value of entertainment and aesthetics***

Kirin dance is highly entertaining. In the major festivals and festive days of Southern Guangdong folklore, according to the needs of people's collective entertainment, cheerful and funny Kirin dance plays an important role. The art of Kirin is peculiarly shaped, the dance lineup is grand and lively, and the music has strong Lingnan musical characteristics. Kirin dance is a folk art that integrates music, dance, percussion, paper craft and painting craft, and is highly watchable. It is a good choice for college students who like both elegance and high street fashion. With strong rhythm, it not only entertains the body and mind, but also enriches the cultural life and improve personal artistic cultivation, which is in line with the physical and mental development of contemporary college students.

Kirin dance has strong dance ability. For example, the Kirin dance of Hakka in Zhangmutou, legend has it that wherever the toes of the Kirin have stepped, it will bring good luck to the people there. With the light, heavy, slow and fast percussion instruments, the Kirin dances, sometimes playing wildly, sometimes tumbling in the air, showing movements such as "caiqing", "shijiao" and rolling. Another example is the Huangge Kirin Dance Team, which has organized and developed the traditional Kirin dance, with the performance of "Kirin getting out of the hole, rolling around, playing the tail, finding the green, exploring the green, playing with the green, hitting the earth, spitting out the jade book, wandering in the garden"<sup>[3]</sup> and so on. These vivid animal forms and attitudes are directly derived from real life, not simply simulated and reproduced, but beautifully processed to express a certain cultural connotation, and to put forward people's aspirations for a better life. The combination of Kirin caiqing and the southern martial art of "playing the long stick" makes the dance more difficult and ornamental, which is of high training value for professional dance students.

## **5. The reflection of Kirin dance into the college classroom**

According to the current situation of dance in colleges and universities, dance majors have no substantial contact with Kirin dance, and most of them have not even watched it. The main reason is that Kirin dance as a traditional folk dance is not popular enough to enter the university dance classroom teaching, and the creation of Kirin dance as teaching material is almost blank, only some local representative folk teams perform and compete in the event. The purpose of teaching Kirin dance in colleges and universities is to develop the cultural heritage of Kirin in a better way through the efforts of art educators to excavate and organize the research.

### ***5.1. Expanding and Inviting in Kirin Dance***

"Expanding" means fieldwork and outdoor learning. Kirin dance originates from and is rooted in folklore, and is the result of people's creative and aesthetic wisdom. For the movement rules and cultural connotation of folk dance, college teachers and students need field study to experience the most real emotional connotation of folk dance culture and to collect and obtain the most accurate and vivid dance materials. In order to enter the classrooms of colleges and universities and promote the dance, art educators must organize study tours and go to the locals to get creative materials, so as to draw primary resources for the construction of teaching materials and academic research of Kirin dance.

"Inviting" means the cultural inheritor demonstrate the dance moves. The transmission carrier of dance is people, and the inheritance of folkloric dance is mainly carried on by people, from generation to generation, through learning from teachers and teaching by word of mouth to continue this culture. It is also a necessary tool to hire old folk artists and special professionals to teach dance teachers and students in the school. Through the training of dance teachers and the use of Kirin dance steps and basic movements combined with folk dance classroom teaching methods, the content and form of Kirin dance classroom teaching with local ethnic characteristics is formed to broaden students' exposure to learning.

### ***5.2. The textbook writing of Kirin dance and the use of modern teaching technology***

#### ***5.2.1. Kirin dance teaching materialization***

In college dance textbooks, there are few textbooks about folk traditional dance, so it is especially important to organize the textbooks to see if Kirin dance can come into the college dance classroom. With the teaching materials of Kirin dance, dance teachers can learn its basic knowledge more conveniently, and can effectively promote dance majors to know Kirin dance and achieve the integration of dance art literacy and theoretical knowledge, so that the excellent folk Kirin dance can enter the college classroom more quickly.

The basic movements with typical characteristics are extracted from the regional characteristics and performance forms of Kirin dance. For example, the basic steps of Zhongshan Kirin Dance are "virtual steps, independent steps, dingzi steps, half-bow steps, dragon riding steps, bouncing", etc., which show the powerful and light form of Kirin. First of all, the construction of the teaching materials can be based on the typical movements of these performance routines, refined, processed into dance elements, standardized into basic movements of the teaching materials. Followed by the capture of the performance form and characteristics of the Kirin dance, the complete performance art routines would be put into the teaching materials, so that the traditional folk art forms can be preserved. Finally, beautifying and processing the Kirin dance enhance the artistry of the image of the Kirin, refining and creating the show more watchable. The students will also be able to create more performative dance combinations and works.

The combination of step-by-step collation model is borrowed from the mature folk dance textbooks. "The so-called gradual progression is from simple to complex, from monotonous to diverse, from the rehearsal room to the stage"<sup>[4]</sup>, to organize teaching materials with systematic, standardized training, which is conducive to the implementation of Kirin dance teaching. For example, from single movement training to simple pace training, and finally to a comprehensive performance combination, so that students can build a solid foundation and truly master the dance style of Kirin dance. Only a teaching system that integrates teaching, creation, performance, and research can properly and truly introduce Kirin dance into the college classroom.

### ***5.2.2. Use of modern educational technology***

A large number of pictures and dance videos of Kirin dance folk activities are collected and made into courseware with modern teaching techniques, so that students can watch videos and other modern technological courseware to learn Kirin dance more easily. The dance is performed in the form of songs and dances during major festivals and celebrations, such as the Nange Kirin Dance, which is a lively dance scene with eight Kirin dancing at the same time, with two large Kirin leading the dance and six small Kirin dancing around. With eight Kirin of different sizes performing and cooperating with each other, the performance shows a lively yet solemn attitude. The costume of Kirin dance has strong local characteristics and the artistic shape of the prop Kirin is very unique. By appreciating the scenes of Kirin dance festivals, the customary style of Kirin dance is imaginatively displayed and combined with its dance costumes and props to fully satisfy students' curiosity about ethnic folk traditional dance and stimulate their interest in learning, thus motivating them to learn Chinese traditional ethnic culture.

### ***5.3. The value of Kirin dance cultural symbols for professional dance classes in colleges and universities***

#### ***5.3.1. The value to the college classroom***

Highlighting the regional characteristics of the dance classroom would be the first step. The target of training dance talents would be mainly focus on primary and secondary school dance teachers as well as cultural workers. The training process should face the public supervision and adapt to the widely diverse and composite needs of the education market. The folk dance classroom in colleges and universities should adapt to regional differences, student differences and school characteristics to provide students with broader choices. We should pay attention to the local culture reservation, refine and process the material of Kirin dance, make local folk dance materials suitable for college dance classes, and promote it into the dance classes of Lingnan colleges and universities, so that young people can discover the Kirin culture, which seems essential to promote the inheritance and development of the Kirin culture.

Optimizing the content of dance classroom teaching would be the next action. Although traditional folk dance is getting more and more attention, the folk dance courses with local characteristics carried out in colleges and universities are still not rich enough. The folk dance classes in colleges and universities mostly follow the teaching materials from the folk dance department of Beijing Dance Academy, with five major folk dances (Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur and Korean) from eight regions as the main teaching materials. Most dance students, especially those who previously studied in art schools, have been exposed to and studied the original folk dance material series before entering college. However, after entering college, the fact that they still have not been exposed to new learning materials lead them receding their interests in learning. The introduction of local folk dance to the college program syllabus can make students receive the inspiration of folk dance, feel the cultural and artistic aspects of the folk dance, and consciously take up the mission of preserving and developing traditional culture and its vitality. Bringing the Kirin dance into college dance classes will not only fill the gap of local folk dance materials and enrich the content of college dance courses, but also better inherit and develop these diverse and colorful folk dances with local characteristics.

#### ***5.3.2. Value presentation of cultural symbols in the classroom***

"The most important thing in preserving folk culture is to recognize the symbols of folk culture and understand where its value lies."<sup>[5]</sup> The cultural significance of Kirin dance is multiple and dynamic. As a form and carrier of history and culture, it is unique to China and is a "living fossil" of folk belief culture. The historical significance it carries is a kind of valuable cultural heritage, and the spirituality it embodies is worthy of our inheritance and development. If art educators can analyze and study its cultural heritage, organize, refine while processing the dance forms and movements, and bring Kirin dance into the classroom, it would be an excellent way to preserve and inherit. In the process of teaching, students not only learn the Kirin dance, but also experience the edifying effect of it, which not only enriches students' cultural lives while strengthening their patriotism, but also enhances their curiosity for traditional culture. With the students' active exploration, hopefully they will find out the cultural implications, so that they have a chance to learn history, and achieve the purpose of inheriting and developing traditional culture.

## 6. Conclusion

Kirin has distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics, as the valuable heritage of Lingnan dance culture and the distinctive regional cultural symbol, Kirin dance is a distinctive folk art activity which is closely related to people's daily lives and inherited from the traditional Chinese culture. In the 21st century, colleges and universities play an important role to inherit and develop folk culture, for the inheritance of traditional folk dance culture we need the platform of colleges and universities to cultivate new talents to spread its influence and pass it on from generation to generation. The introduction of Kirin dance into college classrooms as the implementation of folk dance classroom teaching features will not only enrich the resources and teaching content of college dance classrooms, but also make students consciously take up the mission of preserving and passing on the traditional culture. Thus, the Kirin dance will develop and popularize significantly, the culture of the Kirin dance will pass on and expand in an appropriate and feasible way. The protection and development of the Kirin dance is a long-term and arduous task requiring the support and joint efforts of the whole society.

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