

# On the Application of Sheepskin Drum in Qiang Sacrificial Culture

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**Abstract:** Chinese ethnic folk dance is a culture that carries the most primitive memories of every ethnic group. Nowadays, with the development of society, these ethnic cultures are constantly being influenced, diluted, or even disappeared by modern civilization. Therefore, how to inherit and develop ethnic culture has become a common concern for many researchers. The sheepskin drum dance of the Qiang ethnic group, like other ethnic cultures, also faces the problem of how to inherit and develop in the course of historical development. This article focuses on the application of sheepskin drum in the sacrificial culture of the Qiang ethnic group. It is hoped that through this research, more people can understand the artistic charm of sheepskin drum and provide reference for the inheritance and development of national culture.

**Keywords:** Sheepskin Drum; Qiang Ethnic Group; Dance; Sacrifice; Develop the Sheepskin Drum Carries Thousands of Years of Qiang Ethnic Culture

## 1. Introduction

As a magical tool, it not only possesses the power and guidance of gods, but also serves as the complete refuge of the Qiang people for their lives.

[1] Although the Qiang people do not have their own ethnic script, their culture has been preserved through oral transmission. The sheepskin drum of the Qiang ethnic group is an artistic dance form, mostly used for praying for blessings. According to its function, it can be divided into the following three types: first, respecting heaven and earth, and praying for blessings. The second is to respect all things. The third is to respect our ancestors and ensure safety. [2] The most important subject that emerged in the early Qiang culture was "Shibi" - the term used in Qiang language to refer to

male Qiang spiritual and cultural masters. The oral history and literature of Shibi are very rich in content, including myths, legends, fables of longing, stories, fairy tales, proverbs, songs, etc. From astronomy and geography to weddings, funerals, and weddings, there will be their presence. They are the spiritual soul and cultural essence of the Qiang people, like encyclopedias. The religious ideology of the Qiang ethnic group is based on the belief that all things have spirits, and in rituals such as ritual, recitation of scriptures, worship, witchcraft, and divination, Shibi has become a wizard who communicates with gods, ghosts, and humans.

## 2. Overview of Sheepskin Drum Dance

### 2.1 The Evolution of Sheepskin Drum Dance

The Qiang ethnic group has a long cultural history, and the dance movements of the Qiang ethnic group are highly characteristic of the physique and personality of Qiang women, making it one of the representative forms of their cultural and artistic heritage. Qiang dance reflects the life of the ethnic group and has been continuously developed over a long period of time, greatly promoting the prosperity and progress of Qiang culture in China. It is also a major component of the cultural life of the Qiang people. With the continuous development of the social economy, Qiang dance has also been enriched and improved, reflecting the unique ethnic characteristics of the ethnic group. Protecting and inheriting it is of great significance[3]. In ancient China, there was a saying that "sheep are big and delicious", which originally referred to the satisfaction of appetite and taste. It can be extended to mean "delicious" and "beautiful". [4] The origin of the Qiang ethnic group using sheep as their totem and sheepskin as their drum noodles can be traced back. The Qiang sheepskin drum dance originated from

the legendary story of "Mu Jie Zhu and Dou An Zhu". It was a legend that the daughter of the heavenly god descended to earth and fell in love and married a Qiang man. It was also because her daughter lived in the human world that the heavenly god allowed her ancestor, Mula, to descend to the world to drive away disasters and evil, and thus began to use the method of jumping sheepskin drum dance to practice the art. According to literature records, "sheepskin drum dance" was originally a religious dance performed by the Qiang people during the "Shibi" ritual, and later evolved into a folk dance. "Shibi", also known as "Xu" or "Abba Xu", is a religious teacher who does not deviate from agricultural production. He is not only the host of primitive religious activities, but also a disseminator of Qiang culture and art. Almost every Qiang village has one person. Activities such as mountain worship, restoration, calming, exorcism, disease treatment, purification, soul summoning, disaster elimination, as well as the naming of cohabitation and newborn babies, as well as the burial and transcendence of the deceased, cannot be separated from them. Witches are limited to men and can get married and start a family. They do not have religious organizations or temples, but they have to worship ancestors and "monkey headed boys" throughout history.

During the performance, the dancers hold a sheepskin drum in their left hand and a drumstick in their right hand, dancing while tapping the sheepskin drum. At present, the sheepskin drum performances that we can usually see have a fixed routine of movements, which is formed through creative arrangement based on people imitating various animal forms and mastering some natural laws in production labor. The fifth generation inheritor of the sheepskin drum, Qian Shaokuan, summarized the movements of the sheepskin drum as "24 Po". According to the inheritor's explanation, "Po" is a local dialect that means "move". Each movement of the twenty-four mothers has its corresponding name and origin, as well as a fixed rhythm. The twenty-four women are: small seven stars, small eight characters, small door opening, large eight characters, inside rubbing, rabbit digging, three o'clock in one step, magpies climbing branches, Beidou hanging north, gold thread lifting silver lamp, yellow dragon swinging tail,

white horse hanging hoof, fairy connecting feet, withered trees rooting, toad cattle scratching, yellow warbler drying wings, rhinoceros watching the moon, Arhat dozing, sows scratching, antelopes fighting, flies rubbing feet, beautiful women stringing flowers, the king of Qin leaving, fairy bridging. At this point, the sheepskin drum dance has acquired the significance of choreography.

## **2.2 The Primitive Emotional Expression of Sheepskin Drum Dance**

The Qiang ethnic dance is characterized by its unique rhythmic, physical, aesthetic, and artistic charm, and uses the body as a cultural symbol to record and reflect the production, life, and spiritual qualities of the Qiang ethnic group. [5] In the history of the ancient Qiang people, there have been multiple wars to resist foreign invasions. It can be said that war has been a difficult and lengthy part of their lives, and this kind of life has emerged from the sacrificial dances performed around the end of the war. [6] In the long process of historical development, the ritual activity of sheepskin drum dance, which relies on Duan Gong, has been passed down. In addition to the movements of "twenty-four grandmothers" who only dance and do not sing, there are also thirty-six sections of flower beds and seventy-two sections of large altars in some sacrificial ceremonies, in which there are situations where only singing but not dancing and singing while dancing occur. The lyrics spoken by Duke Duan are all hummed in Chinese, mostly about allusions of immortals or historical heroes, mainly including chapters such as "Inviting the Gods", "Playing the Dragon", "Offering Incense", "Sacrificing the Lonely", etc.

Nowadays, dancers in sheepskin drum performances often wear Qiang ethnic costumes, and the flame totem on the sheepskin drum also reflects the Qiang people's worship of fire. In addition to traditional sheepskin drum worship activities, sheepskin drum performances are also performed in important festivals of the Qiang and Han ethnic groups and local large-scale celebrations. These phenomena all reflect the great inclusiveness and adaptability of sheepskin drum sacrificial dance in the development and inheritance process, which not only promotes the mutual integration of

ethnic cultures, but also helps to strengthen the unity and cultural identity of people of all ethnic groups. In the sacrificial ceremony, in addition to the "stepping on the altar" performance of the sheepskin drum, Duke Duan also uses a tool token to draw the "word taboo", blow the horn horn of an ox, shake the master's knife, perform divination, and wear a mask to perform. Mysterious and complex spells easily lead the audience into a situation of "gods" and "ghosts". Among them, there are five masks representing different characters, including the red "earth" with a long beard, the black "judge" with a ponytail beard, the red "monk sending joy" with a heavenly eye on his head, the kind-hearted "Guanyin sending his son", and the black majestic "Qiang King Meng Huo". During performances, corresponding masks are worn according to the content of the ritual. If performing on large stages, masks are generally not worn.

The movements of the sheepskin drum are simple and powerful, bold and unrestrained, mainly consisting of foot steps, one foot jumps, two foot jumps, changing feet jumps, and leaps. The two hands hold the sheepskin drum and drumstick respectively, and beat the drum to accompaniment. The entire dance atmosphere is filled with exciting drum sounds, which are highly ornamental. With the development of the times, the primitive sheepskin drum dance has gradually shifted from its function of entertaining gods to a folk dance that is half entertaining gods and half entertaining people.

### **3. The Main Characteristics of Sheepskin Drum Dance**

#### **3.1 Characteristics of Clothing and Props**

Shibi's attire is characterized by wearing a monkey hat on his head, a skirt underneath (which is not commonly seen in other local dances), and holding a sheepskin drum in his hand. However, due to regional differences, there are also differences in the attire of Shibi in different regions, mainly manifested in their upper body attire. For example, in the areas of Wenchuan and Lixian, Shibi often wears short coats and skirts; Shibi in Maoxian and other areas often wears leopard skin (while others have sheepskin). In addition to the sheepskin drum, Shibi's magical tools also include a divine stick, a sound plate, and so on. The

attire of other sacrificial personnel is usually tied with a headscarf on their head, dressed in sheepskin jackets, tied with waist straps, pants on their lower bodies, leg straps on their calves, and holding sheepskin drums in their hands. The drum is made of round single-sided sheepskin, with a sheep head pattern painted on the surface. Depending on the customs of different regions, the width of the drum edge is approximately 10-12 centimeters, and the diameter is about 34-40 centimeters. One side is a drum surface, and the other side is empty. The measuring structure in the middle is used as a handle, making it convenient to hold and use the drum. There are two types of drumsticks that can be used in conjunction with sheepskin drums: straight drumsticks and arched drumsticks. Except for the drum surface, all other parts are made of wood. The drum surface is circular, with triangular patterns painted on the edges, resembling a sun shining brightly. [7] The drumstick is made of rattan or wooden strips, with a hook shape and a length of about 58 centimeters. The head of the drumstick is wrapped in colored cloth, and the tail is tied with colored broken ropes. Because both the drum and drumstick are tied with colored ropes, the dance becomes more splendid and mysterious.

#### **3.2 Action Characteristics**

Through the overall description and dynamic analysis of the sheepskin drum sacrificial ceremony and the typical movement of the sheepskin drum, "Twenty four Po", it can be seen that the movements of the sheepskin drum mainly focus on the lower limb steps. The name of each movement summarizes the expression form of dance movements, mainly imitating the living habits and dynamics of animals. This is closely related to the local agricultural labor production mode and folk beliefs. The drumbeat rhythm mainly adopts a relatively stable rhythm type of 2/4 beats, where the dancer moves while tapping the drumbeat, and the foot steps match the drumbeat, basically one beat at a time. The entire dance style is standardized and orderly, simple and dignified, and passionate and powerful. In the sacrificial ceremony, with the sound of drums, the sheepskin drum dance appears even more mysterious and majestic. At this point, the main characteristics of sheepskin drum sacrificial dance can be

summarized as follows:

### 3.2.1 Programmability

From the perspective of the sheepskin drum sacrificial ceremony, each stage of the ceremony is arranged by the altar master and is interconnected. The programmatic structure of the sheepskin drum sacrificial ceremony can be seen from the opening, inviting, entertaining, sending off, and locking of the altar; From the perspective of the dance essence of sheepskin drum dance, the form transformation of the Duan Gong's dance from the inside out, counterclockwise rotation in the altar, and the complete and standardized set of movements during the stepping on the altar must be ensured. Each movement must be performed even multiple times and not less than one woman, all of which are specific manifestations of the programmatic nature of sheepskin drum dance. In addition, there are regulations on the order in which masked characters appear. First, the literary judge and the martial judge appear, followed by the monk and fairy maiden, and finally, the Yi king. Overall, the sheepskin drum sacrificial ceremony, dance, and the use of props reflect a clear programmatic meaning.

### 3.2.2 Functionality

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory points out that physiological needs are the most fundamental human needs, as well as the foundation of other levels of needs. Therefore, primitive ritual dances were almost always based on ensuring the most basic physiological needs of humans. The basic function of sheepskin drum sacrificial dance is to meet the basic needs of human survival. Its emergence and development were initially only to overcome human powerlessness and fear of nature, and are closely related to human production and life. But with the development of human society, when people meet their physiological needs, they will pursue higher-level psychological needs. With the development of productivity and the progress of human civilization, the function of dance art will also change accordingly. The traditional, ceremonial, customary, emotional, and entertainment cultural functions contained in the sheepskin drum sacrificial dance have gradually been discovered and needed by people.

### 3.2.3 Imitation and performance

Some scholars believe that the most basic

dance steps of sheepskin drum dance are basically derived from the "Yu step". Many Qiang people believe that the Great Yu was their ancestor, and the claim that "Yu gave birth to the Western Qiang" has been widely confirmed. The origin of "Yu Bu" is that Da Yu, who had been managing floods all year round, suffered from leg and foot problems, so he walked with a limp. People call this kind of step "Yu Bu". [8] The body movements of the sheepskin drum are mainly characterized by imitating the form of animals. In addition, Duan Gong wears a special mask and performs specific character images through body imitation. The performance of the 24 women's movements mainly focuses on the steps under their feet, with single foot jumping, double foot jumping, and changing feet jumping as the main movements. Due to the dancers holding sheepskin to encourage accompaniment, the upper limb movements are limited and the movements are singular. However, although the movement form of the sheepskin drum is mainly imitated under the feet, it is coordinated with the transformation of the center of gravity of the upper body's forward and backward leaning, left and right swaying, and high and low undulations, making the entire movement form more lifelike. Dancing with ease is the biggest characteristic of sheepskin drum dance, where the dance movements are repeated until the dancer and the audience are satisfied. The Qiang sheepskin drum dance has the regional characteristics of the northern Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan. Its biggest reason is that the use of drums as specific instruments during dancing has a certain restrictive effect on the dance movements, affecting the body range of the dancers. This creates the biggest difference between Qiang dance and other ethnic dances. [9]

### 3.2.4 Symbolism

The Qiang sheepskin drum dance is a local culture that combines "spiritual communication", "performance", and "historical memory". In the eyes of the Qiang people, there is a distinction between the dance of ritual and the dance of performance. In the context of national intangible cultural heritage, it is listed as a traditional dance category national intangible cultural heritage project due to its performance characteristics. Based

on the research perspective of gaze theory, it can be analyzed that in the process of panoramic viewing of local culture, countries and local societies form visual differences due to their different perspectives, which to some extent affect the definition and reproduction of culture by different subjects, as well as the effectiveness of inheriting and protecting intangible cultural heritage. [10] Most of the Qiang people live in the upper reaches of the Minjiang River. Due to the influence of historical development, lifestyle habits, and cultural awareness, the Qiang people still retain their primitive beliefs and natural worship habits. The sacrificial ceremony of the sheepskin drum is carried out in the "altar field" set up by Duan Gong. In this specific sacred space, Duan Gong endows the materialized props and artifacts created by humans with spirituality, which is reflected in humans, ghosts, and ghosts. A unique communication context is established among the gods, creating a symbolic and illusory scene. For example, in the "bridge building" ceremony, a blue cloth strip covered with "buying soldier money" and "offering incense" is used to symbolize the passage of immortals and divine soldiers on the bridge. Please invite all immortals and divine soldiers to enter the altar through the symbolic bridge and pray for blessings and peace for the host family. Duke Duan offered chicken blood as a sacrifice to the gods, and combined with the recitation in his mouth, endowed the deities enshrined in the altar with spirituality; Representing divine soldiers and generals with five colored "flags", Duan Gong trains soldiers and generals through "playing with flags", and so on. These can also be seen as the sacred and majestic identity of Duan Gong.

For the remains of traditional dance culture of the Qiang ethnic group, collecting and organizing are important, but for traditional culture, inheritance and development are more important. The Qiang people's sheepskin drum dance has no specific procedural regulations, and its performance has typical improvisation characteristics. The dance movements cycle until everyone is fully engaged. Throughout the entire dance process, "Shibi" is the creator of the dance, who determines the form and content of the Qiang sheepskin drum dance. The development and inheritance of Qiang sheepskin drum dance rely on the sacrificial

rituals of Duan Gong, and are deeply influenced and influenced by the local Nuo opera culture.

#### **4. Conclusion**

With the implementation of intangible cultural heritage protection policies, the sheepskin drum sacrificial dance has developed into a unique ethnic folk dance in the unique cultural ecological environment of the Qiang ethnic group. "Folk art grows up in the ecological environment of folk culture, which is the source of folk art. At the same time, folk art is the image carrier and expression form of folk culture, reflecting the nature and characteristics of folk culture, and is an important component of folk culture." In the future, the growth and development environment of sheepskin drum will be more excellent, ensuring that the dynamic development of sheepskin drum conforms to ecological laws, Avoid abnormal mutations or faults.

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