

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Artistic Characteristics and Cultural Values of Jiangnan Folk Dance: A Systematic Analysis of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance

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ABSTRACT

Jiangnan folk dance constitutes a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, embodying the aesthetic, cultural and socio-psychological functions of water-village communities. Represented by dances such as the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, these performances not only showcase artistic styles but also forge community identity through symbolic interactions. This study employs a systematic literature review combined with case analysis, utilising social identity theory and cultural schema frameworks to explore the core characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance and how it conveys artistic styles, cultural connotations and social functions. Analysis encompasses historical origins, regional ecology, movement design, musical systems, costume styles, and prop utilisation. Findings reveal that through movement, music, costume, props, and ritualised interaction, these dances integrate regional culture, social ethics, and folk beliefs into performance. Simultaneously, participatory rituals reinforce collective memory and intergenerational cultural transmission. The S-shaped movements in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance embody aesthetic expression while enhancing group cohesion and social identity through positive differentiation. The study indicates that the psychological significance of Jiangnan folk dance extends beyond artistic expression, serving as a vital mechanism for modern communities to maintain mental wellbeing, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. This research offers valuable insights for dance studies, intangible cultural heritage preservation, and community cultural development.

Keywords: Community Psychology, Social Identity, Jiangnan Folk Dance, Artistic Characteristics, Cultural Value

1. Introduction

Jiangnan Folk dances as a vital symbol of Jiangnan culture, embodying the distinctive lifestyles, belief systems, and aesthetic sensibilities of its inhabitants ^[1]. As a pivotal component within Chinese Folk Dance tradition, they serve not merely as artistic expressions but as vivid reflections of the region's history, natural environment, and humanistic spirit ^[2]. Situated in the densely waterway-networked lower reaches of the Yangtze River, Jiangnan boasts favourable ecological conditions and a profound agricultural heritage. These natural and social factors have collectively nurtured a dance tradition distinguished by its pronounced regional character ^[3]. Jiangnan folk dances are celebrated for their graceful, fluid movements, delicate, lingering rhythms, and profoundly evocative yet subtly expressive artistic conception, embodying the

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region's poetic sensibility towards nature and daily existence [4].

Through prolonged cultural evolution, Jiangnan folk dances have continually absorbed elements from local beliefs, festive rituals, and folk customs, developing diverse artistic forms [5]. Beyond serving performance and entertainment functions, they bear significant social roles in cultural transmission and community identity. From a social psychological perspective, folk dance serves as a living repository of collective cognition. By participating in these ritualised dances, individuals synchronise emotionally with the group, thereby fostering a sense of community belonging and psychological security (6,7). It encodes social norms within movement through symbolic interaction and participatory rituals, while simultaneously reinforcing group cohesion through emotional synchronisation [8]. For instance, in traditional rural societies, folk dances were woven into daily life while reinforcing collective belonging through festive rituals [9]. Their themes often drew from scenes of productive labour—fishing, farming, silk reeling—reflecting the collective memory and values of working communities [10]. Moreover, these dance performances serve as conduits for transgenerational cultural memory, passing on community values and traditional customs to the next generation.

Among numerous folk dances of the Jiangnan region, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance stands as a quintessential example. Originating from fishing villages in the water towns of Jiangnan, it draws inspiration from fishermen's daily labour and folk beliefs. Through movements such as casting nets, rowing, hauling fish, and lifting baskets, the dancers recreate the rhythms of fishing work and the aspirations for bountiful harvests [11]. Performances typically feature fishing baskets and flower drums as props, accompanied by stringed instruments and percussion, endowing the dance with both dynamic energy and distinct regional character [12,13]. As Tan [12] observes, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance not only expresses the joy of labour but also embodies the Jiangnan people's reverence for the aquatic ecosystem and their philosophical contemplation of human-nature symbiosis. From the perspective of social identity theory [14], its distinctive S-shaped movements and ritualised interactions serve as concrete expressions of group values. By fostering positive differentiation, they strengthen internal cohesion and cultivate shared memories within the community [15]. From the perspective of cultural schemata [16,17], these actions not only embody artistic beauty but also become a psychological manifestation of group identity and cultural significance.

This study focuses on two core questions:

First, what are the artistic characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance? Through systematic literature review combined with case analysis of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, this paper reveals the stylistic features and historical evolution of Jiangnan folk dance from aspects including origin, ecological influences, movement vocabulary, costumes, props, and musical structure.

Second, how does the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance embody the artistic style and cultural value of Jiangnan folk dance? By analysing its rhythmic movements, musical structure, and folk functions, this study explores how it presents the core characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance, while examining its cultural value and transmission mechanisms within contemporary social contexts.

Through systematic literature review, this research aims to provide theoretical underpinnings and practical insights for Jiangnan folk dance, offering valuable reference pathways for the preservation, innovation, and modern adaptation of Chinese folk dance.

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature search strategy

To systematically analyse the principal characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance and their specific manifestation in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, this study employs a systematic literature review methodology, strictly adhering to the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). PRISMA aims to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and scientific rigour in the literature review process, clearly presenting the identification, screening, exclusion, and inclusion pathways of studies through a standardised reporting procedure.

This study addresses the following two core research questions:

RQ1: What are the main characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance?

RQ2: How does the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance embody the artistic style and cultural value of Jiangnan folk dance?

To address these questions, a multi-database retrieval strategy was employed. Preliminary exploratory searches were conducted via CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and Google Scholar to identify core research themes related to Jiangnan folk dance, such as its origins and developmental evolution, water-town ecology and regional culture, dance movements, music, costumes, and props. Subsequently, to broaden the international perspective and ensure systematic data coverage, further searches were conducted across four international databases: EBSCOhost, Scopus, Web of Science, and Publon. This multi-source parallel retrieval strategy guarantees the representativeness and academic authority of the research materials. These research domains not only reveal the cultural distinctiveness and artistic value of Jiangnan folk dance but also provide a theoretical foundation for an in-depth case study of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance.

2.2. Search process

The systematic literature search for this study was conducted between March and December 2024, aiming to systematically collate major research findings on Jiangnan folk dances and the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance. Through comparative analysis, it sought to reveal their artistic characteristics and cultural value. The literature retrieval and screening process strictly adhered to the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure transparency, scientific rigour, and reproducibility.

The retrieval strategy employed a Boolean logic search combining subject headings and keywords. Core keywords included: 'Jiangnan folk dance', 'Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance', 'dance characteristics', 'Chinese folk dance', 'cultural heritage', 'artistic style', 'folk performance', and 'traditional dance preservation'. Searches covered both Chinese and English languages to ensure comparability across Chinese and international contexts and maintain a global perspective. Beyond journal articles, the study incorporated three academic monographs to supplement journal research in historical depth and theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, while centered on literature concerning folk dances of the Jiangnan region, this research drew upon comparative studies of folk dances from other Chinese regions and overseas. This approach broadened the interpretative scope of Jiangnan folk dance and provided horizontal theoretical reference points for analysing its principal characteristics. Whilst the research core remains centered on the Jiangnan region and its representative case study, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, the literature selection maintains a cross-regional and cross-cultural theoretical perspective. This approach aims to reveal the common mechanisms and regional variations in folk dance across dimensions such as origin, ecological environment, movement characteristics, costumes, props, and music. These texts are not employed for empirical validation but serve

as theoretical references, thereby deepening the systematic understanding of the artistic style and cultural symbolism of Jiangnan folk dance.

The literature screening process strictly adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, comprising four stages: identification, screening, exclusion, and inclusion (see Table 1: PRISMA Literature Screening Process). An initial search identified 318 potential studies. During data cleaning, 32 duplicate records were first removed; subsequently, 146 studies deemed irrelevant to the research topic were excluded based on title and abstract review. During the full-text review stage, a further 112 studies were excluded for lacking intrinsic dance research or failing to meet methodological standards. Ultimately, 28 research papers (including three monographs) were formally included in the systematic analysis based on the inclusion criteria. These publications comprehensively address the artistic forms, regional characteristics, cultural symbolism, and musical and movement styles of Jiangnan folk dance, providing a thorough theoretical and practical foundation for the research.

Table 1. PRISMA Literature Screening Process

L	Step Description	Number of Documents
Identification	Potential literature was retrieved through CNKI, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Scopus, Web of Science, and Publon.	318
Deduplication	Remove duplicate entries	32
Screening	Exclude literature that does not align with the research topic	146
Eligibility	Exclude literature that does not meet the study methodology or geographical scope criteria.	112
Included	Research literature meeting all criteria (including three monographs)	28

2.3. Literature screening and reporting of results

During the screening process, this study read the abstracts of the initially retrieved literature one by one and judged whether the literature was suitable for inclusion in the in-depth analysis of the systematic literature review based on preset criteria. In view of the fact that the core content of this study is to explore the main characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance and to analyse it in relation to the typical case of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, the screening criteria are designed as follows:

1. the research theme of the literature needs to focus on Jiangnan folk dance, especially the in-depth exploration of its origin and development, geographical influence, dance movements, music, costumes, props and other aspects.
2. the literature must contain specific empirical analyses, case studies or practical content to ensure the scientific and practical reference value of the research conclusions.
3. the literature needs to explore in detail the artistic characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance, such as dance form, aesthetic characteristics, movement rhythm, music rhythm, etc., rather than just an overview study of Chinese folk dance in general.
4. The literature should focus on Jiangnan Folk Dance or Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance as the main object of study, and Chinese folk dances from other regions should only be used as supplementary references, rather than the core discussion.

During the rigorous screening process, we excluded the following literature that did not meet the criteria to ensure the relevance and scientific of the study:

1. Studies not involving Jiangnan folk dances: the studies mainly involve other regions or other dance types, but not the core features, artistic styles or cultural values of Jiangnan folk dances.
2. Literature lacking empirical analysis: studies that only explored theories but did not provide specific cases or dance analyses were not included.
3. Research that focuses mainly on other artistic fields (such as theatre, music, etc.) and is not directly related to dance culture.
4. Studies that are too general or generalised: Literature that fails to discuss in detail the core issues of Jiangnan folk dances, such as artistic characteristics, cultural values, dance movements, and musical rhythms, is not included.

Through the above selection criteria, this study finally selected 28 high-quality studies (including three monographs) from the preliminary literature search as the core research objects. These documents systematically cover the core issues of Jiangnan folk dance, such as artistic characteristics, dance movements, music, props and costumes, cultural values and inheritance protection, etc. They also combine with the specific case of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance to conduct in-depth analyses of its dance forms, narrative expressions, cultural symbols and folklore values.

These screening results provide a solid theoretical and practical foundation for this study, and at the same time, through the experience and empirical analyses summarised in the literature, they provide important references for further exploring the cultural uniqueness and artistic value of Jiangnan folk dance.

3. Findings

RQ1: What are the main characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance?

This section examines the core characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance, using the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance as a representative case. Influenced by natural environment, social structure, and cultural exchange, Jiangnan folk dance has evolved into an art form that embodies regional identity and aesthetic refinement. Its key features include historical origins, the integration of water-town ecology with local culture, and distinctive elements of movement, costume, props, and music. These elements not only convey artistic styles but also function as socio-cultural symbols, reinforcing collective memory and community identity. Through systematic analysis of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, this study clarifies the artistic essence of Jiangnan folk dance and traces its transmission and transformation across time.

3.1. Origin and historical evolution

The evolution of Jiangnan folk dance has been profoundly shaped by its regional culture, social transitions, and ethnic integration. Its origins trace back to prehistoric times, gradually taking form under the influence of Wu–Yue civilisation. Tan ^[12] in “Research on the Inheritance and Innovation of Folk Dance in Southern Jiangsu Province” notes that totemic worship, ritual sacrifice, and agrarian ceremonies in the Liangzhu and Hemudu cultures laid the groundwork for early dance forms. As “Research on the Historical Changes and Contemporary Value of Folk Dance in Southern Jiangsu Province” indicates, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the convergence of Wu and Yue cultures encouraged the flourishing of dance imbued with heroic and martial traits ^[3]. According to “Formation and Development of the Form and Aesthetic Characteristics of ‘Jiangnan Dance’” ^[18], by the Han Dynasty, Jiangnan dance had assimilated the refined aesthetics of Central Plains culture and the elegance of court music, forming a gentle

and graceful style. In the Six Dynasties era, the influx of Confucian ideals through northern migration refined this aesthetic further, enhancing lyrical grace ^[12]. By the Tang and Song dynasties, Jiangnan folk dance was widely practiced in both court and folk celebrations, temple fairs, and festivals, developing distinctive local expressions ^[18].

Liu ^[4] In “*Study on the Flux and Inheritance of Music and Dance in Wu Di*” observed that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Jiangnan folk dances increasingly incorporated folk elements and operatic influences, giving rise to diverse performance formats such as “team dances” and organized dance troupes. Tan ^[12] In “*Research on the Inheritance and Innovation of Folk Dance in Southern Jiangsu Province*” noted that although the decline of the feudal system weakened court music and dance, Jiangnan folk dance persisted through folk practices and became a key medium for local cultural expression. In the modern era, Jiangnan folk dances have maintained traditional elements while evolving towards staged performances and artistic sophistication. Since the 20th century, societal transformations, stage conventions, choreographic innovations, and state-supported rearrangements following the founding of New China have contributed to its role as a prominent form of cultural display (18,4). Contemporary choreographers continue to explore ways of blending traditional dance with modern aesthetics to enhance ornamental and artistic appeal ^[12]. This layering of history also embodies social norms and shared cultural values, enabling communities to maintain a sense of continuity and belonging through dance. However, as Ma ^[10] points out in “*Study on the Creation of Jiangnan Folk Dance from the Perspective of Contemporary Aesthetic Culture*” in a globalized context, balancing the preservation of traditional essence with innovative expression remains a central challenge for Jiangnan folk dance.

Tan ^[12] in “*Research on the Inheritance and Innovation of Folk Dance in Southern Jiangsu Province*” notes that the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, a traditional Jiangnan folk dance from Xishan District, Wuxi City, has gradually evolved under the combined influence of the local water-region ecology, folk culture, and social transformations. Zhang ^[19] in “*Comparative Study on the Artistic Characteristics of Jiangsu Flower Drumming*” further traces its origins to the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods of the Qing Dynasty, initially emerging from lantern dance forms such as the Fish Lantern Dance and Flower Basket Dance, performed during the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. According to the Jiangsu Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance Tutorial ^[20], during the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods, tea lanterns from Fujian and Zhejiang were introduced to Jiangnan, and local performers combined their features with existing lantern dances to create the ‘Eight Treasures Lantern Dance’. Later, Zhou Helin integrated Anhui’s Fengyang Flower Drum singing style into this tradition, giving rise to the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance as a representative folk dance of the Jiangnan region. This creative synthesis enriched the dance’s expressive repertoire and facilitated its broad dissemination, exemplifying the adaptive development of Jiangnan folk dance across different historical periods.

The evolution of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance illustrates the adaptation of Jiangnan folk dance amid social and historical changes. According to the Jiangsu Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance Tutorial ^[20], the dance’s role in Lantern Festival performances declined during the Republican era due to wartime disruptions, but local villagers later reorganised their lantern troupes, allowing the tradition to be revived. After the founding of New China, government support for folk culture further facilitated its development. Notably, in 1957, the dance gained wider recognition through the Jiangsu Provincial Ethnic and Folk Dance Competition. Chinese Folk Dances:Jiangsu Volume ^[21] notes that although folk dance activities were constrained during the Cultural Revolution, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance was revitalised after the reform and opening-up, reaffirming its significant position within local folk traditions. This trajectory

highlights the dance's resilience, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in Jiangnan folk dance.

Regarding the origin of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, multiple sources present diverse folk narratives, enriching its cultural context. Chinese Dance Journal: Jiangsu Volume ^[22] notes that the dance originated from a tale of a fish couple adopting a singing girl who performed with a fish basket and flower drum to attract customers; locals gradually imitated and developed this into a full dance. Tan ^[12] in "Research on the inheritance and innovation of folk dance in southern Jiangsu Province" traces the dance back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, highlighting its initial popularity in Wuxi's Xishan District and Zhangjing Town. The dance became a Lantern Festival highlight due to its lively performance style and close connection with the festival's "colourful lantern adjustment" activities. This trajectory demonstrates the adaptive and evolving nature of Jiangnan folk dance, which grows through folk dissemination and adjusts to the cultural needs of different periods ^[23].

3.2. Water region ecology and regional culture

Liu et al. ^[24] in "Reflections on the cultural characteristics and stage creation of Lingnan folk dance" emphasize that Jiangnan's distinct geography and climate have significantly shaped the formation and evolution of local folk dances. Ma ^[10] in "Study on the creation of Jiangnan folk dance from the perspective of contemporary aesthetic culture" notes that Jiangnan's four seasons and humid climate provide favorable conditions for agriculture, and many dances originated from agricultural activities such as tea planting, tea picking, hoeing, and shoe-soling. These movements served both recreational purposes and realistic depictions of daily labor. Tan ^[12] in "Research on the inheritance and innovation of folk dance in southern Jiangsu Province" further observes that the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance developed through the blending of agricultural and fishery cultures, with dance movements reflecting local production methods like casting nets and sculling boats, illustrating the impact of water-based culture on Jiangnan folk dances. By incorporating local labour and ecological experiences into dance, these performances become living repositories of regional practices, sustaining community knowledge and identity.

The ecological environment of the Jiangnan water region significantly shapes the content and style of its folk dances. Liu ^[25] in "A test analysis of the influence of 'water culture' on Jiangsu folk dance" noted that Jiangnan's longitudinal and transverse water systems, known as the "land of fish and rice," have profoundly influenced local culture and artistic expression. Qiao ^[3] in "Research on the historical changes and contemporary value of folk dance in Southern Jiangsu Province" emphasized that the fluidity and agility characteristic of Jiangnan's water culture give folk dances a distinct style, exemplified in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance through movements such as fishing, sculling, casting, and retrieving nets, reflecting the regional water aesthetics.

Water resources not only dictate production patterns but also lay the cultural foundation for local dances. Liu ^[5] in "Stage presentation of Wuxi 'Non-legacy' folk dance" highlighted that waterways were the primary transportation mode, with the saying "no boat means no feet" reflecting water's centrality in daily life. Ma ^[10] in "Study on the creation of Jiangnan folk dance from the perspective of contemporary aesthetic culture" noted that the water environment facilitated rice cultivation, fisheries, and silk production, embedding these cultural elements into Jiangnan folk dance. In the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, the fish basket and flower drum symbolize the economic activities of the water region, while movements such as casting nets, carrying baskets, and sculling authentically represent fishermen's labor ^[11]. Furthermore, Liu ^[5] explained that the dance's footwork employs the "Boat Gang Step" and "Dragging Step," combining subtle knee

tremors with rounded arm movements to form a smooth ‘S’-shaped curve, evoking the flowing rivers of Jiangnan and highlighting the dance’s lightness and agility.

The water culture of Jiangnan significantly shapes the choreography and movement design of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance. Qiao [3] in “Research on the historical changes and contemporary value of folk dance in Southern Jiangsu Province” highlighted that elements such as bridge culture, boat culture, fishing culture, and rice culture permeate Jiangnan folk dances, enriching their expression. Boat-themed dances are especially prominent in Jiangnan, with the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance as a representative example.

Tan [12] in “Research on the inheritance and innovation of folk dance in southern Jiangsu Province” noted that the dance preserves labor movements on boats, such as bracing poles, sculling, and casting nets, while dancers’ rhythmic movements convey the fluidity of water, reflecting the rhythm of water villages. Zhou [1] in “Research on the characteristics and inheritance of Jiangnan folk dance” emphasized that the dance’s steps and body movements prioritize softness, fluidity, and flexibility, with performers imitating water’s undulation through gentle, rounded motions. Liu [5] in “Stage presentation of Wuxi ‘Non-legacy’ folk dance” added that formations also reflect water’s fluidity, such as staggered flows and circular marching, creating a visually light and agile effect. Jiangnan folk dances often use “water formations” or “boat lines,” enhancing the fluidity of group movements and vividly representing the aesthetics of water village life [3]. Collectively, the Jiangnan water environment not only influences the movement and choreography but also shapes the delicate, smooth, and flowing artistic style of Jiangnan folk dance. This feature is clearly exemplified in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, marking it as a key representative of the region’s folk dances.

3.3. Movement characteristics

The movement style of Jiangnan folk dance is shaped by regional culture, natural environment, and folk practices, showing distinct characteristics across southern, central, and northern Jiangsu. Ye et al. [26] in *“A study on the regional characteristics of Jiangsu folk dance”* noted that southern Jiangsu dances are gentle, agile, and soft, emphasizing upper-limb flexibility and fine control; northern Jiangsu dances are more robust and expansive, focusing on lower-limb movements; central Jiangsu combines both, presenting a dignified, well-coordinated rhythm. Southern Jiangsu folk dance, as a core of Jiangnan dance, emphasizes ‘S’-shaped rhythms, winding movement trajectories, and restrained amplitude, reflecting its unique artistic quality [27,28]. Through repeated communal performance, such movement patterns also reinforce social cohesion and shared cultural memory, providing a bodily experience of local heritage.

These movement features originate from the water-region culture’s rhythmic sense and daily labor habits, producing soft and continuous flow. Zhou [1] highlighted that southern Jiangsu dance relies heavily on waist and hip articulation, creating elegant ‘S’ curves, whereas central Jiangsu emphasizes hierarchical and smooth motion paths. Liu [5] explained that the ‘three curves’ rhythm, along with pendulum-like and trembling gestures, derives from fishermen’s work on boats, expressing water-region life. Tan [12] further emphasized that the ‘round S’ shape is a hallmark of Jiangnan folk dance, where coordinated movements of the head, torso, waist, hips, and legs generate dynamic S-shaped rhythms, while static poses maintain soft curvatures.

As a representative of Jiangnan folk dance, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance exemplifies regional artistic traits. According to Chinese Folk Dance: Jiangsu Volume [21], it features three main roles: the fisherwoman, the fisher girl, and the clown. The fisherwoman’s movements, such as ‘stepping back and piercing’ and ‘basket half squat,’ convey dignity and steadiness through S-shaped twisting of the hips and ribs. The fisher girl performs ‘rounding horizontal 8 characters’ and ‘slanting squatting flower drums,’

emphasizing feminine softness with rounded shoulders and arm motions. The clown uses exaggerated movements such as ‘8 characters turning the fan’ and the horse stance, enhancing theatricality and expressiveness [22].

The choreography of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance reflects the Jiangnan water region, combining smooth footwork with waist rhythms to express water culture. Tan [12] noted that its core rhythm centers on swinging and trembling, with the ribs and hips twisting to create coherent, rounded visuals. The interplay of static S-shaped poses and dynamic S-shaped rhythms adds depth and visual impact [1]. Movements like the ‘Boat Gang Step’ and ‘Drag Step,’ paired with slight knee trembles and rounded upper-limb motions, highlight the light and agile style of Jiangnan dance [5].

Role-specific physical design further emphasizes soft curves. Zhang [19] stated that female roles focus on shoulder-hip coordination with light, steady steps, whereas clown roles exaggerate knee trembles and arm circles for theatrical effect. Step designs centered on winding, rubbing, and stability reflect the profound influence of Jiangnan water-region life, with meandering trajectories and smooth, light movements demonstrating the region’s cultural imprint on dance.

3.4. Costume

The costumes of Jiangnan folk dances reflect the influence of regional culture, social life, and performance functions, with their colors, materials, and design embodying Jiangnan’s distinctive aesthetic. Liu [5] notes that the attire is both practical and decorative: female dancers wear colorful headscarves and patched blouses, while males wear traditional long-sleeved robes and wide-waisted trousers, suited to work life and the water-region aesthetic. Zhu [29] in “Analysis of the Characteristics and Development Trend of Jiangnan Folk Dance” adds that cool tones like cyan and blue dominate, expressing serenity and the subtle, introverted temperament of the local population. Zhou [1] observes that vertical patchwork in lapel shirts, skirts, trousers, and headscarves enhances slenderness and fluidity, echoing the gentle style of Jiangnan folk dance.

The Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance costumes, as recorded in Chinese Dance Journal: Jiangsu Volume [22], reflect the traditional Jiangnan style and have transitioned from practical daily wear to theatrical stage costumes. Early attire mimicked fishermen’s clothing, such as green bibs and loose trousers for women, and watermelon hats with long robes for men, emphasizing realism [21]. With evolving performance forms, costumes incorporated opera influences to enhance artistic expression. Female fisherwomen adopted long green dresses for dignity, bright-colored outfits for playfulness, and clowns used contrasting colors for dramatic effect.

Modern designs standardize and customize costumes while retaining tradition and incorporating contemporary stage aesthetics [19]. Today, fisherwomen wear blue satin dresses and embroidered shoes for elegance, aunts wear pink tops and blue shoes for liveliness, and clowns don green tops with red trousers and hats for comedic impact. Contemporary designs focus on color coordination and character depiction—pleated skirts, floral patterns, and headbands highlight dignity or playfulness, while exaggerated clown hats emphasize humor. Costumes thus operate as visual markers of regional identity and social roles, allowing audiences to instantly recognize cultural norms and character traits embedded in folk traditions. These costumes enhance stage visuality and reinforce Jiangnan’s regional characteristics and character identities.

3.5. Props

Props in Jiangnan folk dance serve not only as decorative elements but also as carriers of regional culture and folk traditions. Tang [30] in “The Change of Jiangsu Folk Dance from Countryside to Town” notes

that long-term development influenced by geography and folk culture has led to the effective use of props, including flower drums, fish drums, flower boats, river mussels, word card dance, lamp dance, dragon dance, lion dance, stilt walking, and bamboo horses. Qian ^[31] in “The Cultural Connotation of Props in Jiangsu Folk Dance” highlights that these props originate from daily labor, rituals, and recreational activities, reflecting Jiangnan folk life. Zuo ^[32] emphasizes that props such as fish boats and nets enhance interactivity and realism, while Zuo ^[32] in “Research on the Cultural Connotation and Symbolic Representation of Jiangnan Dance Props” classifies props into life, production, religious, and military categories, showing their role in shaping imagery and cultural expression.

In the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, props are particularly central. According to Chinese Dance Journal: Jiangsu Volume ^[22] and Chinese Folk Dance: Jiangsu Volume ^[21], core props include flower drums, fish baskets, handkerchiefs, and folding fans, corresponding to the three roles of fish nuns, fisherwomen, and clowns. Flower drums convey festivity and joy; fish baskets and handkerchiefs highlight gentleness and enhance narrative; folding fans in clown roles add humour through exaggerated movements ^[12,29]. Props often recreate fishing labor, such as placing small, rolled fish in baskets or simulating net retrieval, adding realism.

Modern stage adaptations of props balance tradition with theatrical aesthetics ^[19]. The use of culturally meaningful props also supports the internalization of community values, allowing both performers and spectators to participate in shared cultural narratives and collective memory. Fish baskets feature lotus and fish patterns symbolizing harvest; flower drums combine bright colors and fibrous materials; and clown folding fans incorporate Chinese opera elements to heighten humour. Ma ^[10] notes that prop innovation enhances visual impact and broadens development potential for Jiangnan folk dance. Overall, Zuo ^[32] confirms that props enrich dance forms, reinforce regional traits, and strengthen cultural connotations.

3.6. Music

The musical style of Jiangnan folk dance is deeply rooted in local folk traditions, with silk and bamboo instruments and drum rhythms creating a lyrical and rhythmic atmosphere. Tan ^[12] notes that live accompaniment using gongs, drums, and silk-and-bamboo instruments enhances the dance's folk characteristics. Tang ^[13] in “A Comparative Study of Flower Drum Dance in the North and South Regions of Jiangsu Province” adds that Jiangnan Flower Drum Dance is usually accompanied by Southern Jiangsu folk songs with gentle melodies and smooth rhythms, often featuring instruments such as erhu, flute, and pipa combined with flower drum percussion. The dance is highly improvisational and often performed in the Southern Jiangsu dialect, allowing performers to flexibly match music to movement and mood.

The Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance inherits these musical traits, blending delicate silk-and-bamboo textures with local folk tunes, reflecting the distinctive sound of the Jiangnan region. According to Jiangsu Fish Basket Flower Drum Tutorial ^[20], accompaniment is primarily silk-and-bamboo instruments, enriched with rhythmic flourishes from flower drums and lianxiang sticks to strengthen musical layering and dance rhythm. Singing remains central, often improvised, with early performances featuring role reversals and false voice singing to enhance dramatic expression. Tang ^[13] highlights that the music also integrates elements from Fengyang Flower Drum Opera and tea-picking lantern tunes, creating smooth, soft melodies that evoke the Jiangnan water-town atmosphere, while instruments such as pipa, erhu, and drums enhance narrative and emotional expression. Musical accompaniment, by synchronizing with movement, fosters emotional resonance and group cohesion, further embedding regional cultural identity in collective experience.

Over time, the musical form has evolved from simple ditties to a richer accompaniment system. Early tunes included the horse lantern tune, fish lantern tune, and jumping spring bull tune, with lively local

melodies [21]. After the founding of New China, Jiangnan silk-and-bamboo ensembles became central, supplemented by folk instruments such as pipa, sanxian, yangqin, and flute to enhance musical hierarchy and artistry. Lyrics often depict fishermen's labour, following a three-part structure. For instance, lines like "Running on the shore with a fishing basket in hand, carrying a burden on the shoulder with hands crossed" express work scenes while reinforcing rhythm and dance expression [22]. Quotations from Southern Jiangsu folk tunes such as Selling Fish and Cutting Flowers further integrate melody with movement, enhancing the performance's artistic appeal [12].

RQ2: How does the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance reflect the artistic style and cultural value of Jiangnan folk dance?

As a key element of Chinese folk dance, Jiangnan folk dance has been passed down and evolved over time, displaying a distinct artistic style and rich cultural value. Dong [33] in "A study of the relationship between the expressions of folk-dance language art and culture" notes that the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, as a representative of Jiangnan folk dance, preserves its core features while expressing the region's unique artistic style and cultural significance through local traditions, folklore, and performance. This section examines how the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance reflects Jiangnan folk dance's artistic style and cultural value by analyzing its origins, historical development, and the influence of geography, choreography, costumes, props, and music.

3.7. Historical continuity and development

The evolution of Jiangnan folk dance has been deeply shaped by regional culture, social transformation, and ethnic integration. Its stylistic formation can be traced from the ritual performances of prehistoric civilization, through the Wu–Yue cultural traditions, the court dances of the Han and Tang dynasties, and the operatic flourishing of the Ming and Qing periods [18]. Following this developmental trajectory, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance gradually took shape, as noted in the Jiangsu Fish Basket Flower Drum Tutorial [20]. Its origins date back to the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns of the Qing Dynasty, when it first appeared as part of the lantern festival performances. Over time, it incorporated elements from other folk dances such as the tea-picking lantern and Fengyang flower drum, eventually forming an independent dance genre with distinct regional characteristics. This continuity enables intergenerational transmission of both aesthetic principles and social norms, reinforcing a shared sense of cultural belonging. As recorded in Chinese Folk Dances: Jiangsu Volume [21], the evolution of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance illustrates the dual function of Jiangnan folk dance in self-entertainment and performance, as well as its ability to adapt to historical and social transformations, evolving progressively toward theatrical and stage-oriented forms.

3.8. Reflecting the culture of Jiangnan water region

The natural environment of the Jiangnan region, characterized by its intricate network of rivers and lakes, has profoundly shaped the stylistic formation of Jiangnan folk dance. The fluidity and grace of Jiangnan dance movements are closely tied to the region's aquatic culture, where the flexibility and rhythm of flowing water directly influence bodily expression and choreographic tempo [12]. As a dance form nurtured by this water-bound culture, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance vividly depicts scenes of fishermen's daily life—such as "casting nets" and "sculling"—through movements that imitate the gestures of fishing labour, giving the performance a strong sense of realism and vitality [3]. Furthermore, its music employs the soft, lingering melodies of Jiangnan folk tunes, accompanied by smooth, wave-like rhythms that evoke the tranquil ambience of fishing villages around Taihu Lake [13]. By reproducing ecological and occupational experiences, the dance fosters communal understanding and preserves collective memory of water-town life.

Altogether, these elements embody the regional aesthetics of Jiangnan folk dance and highlight the harmonious relationship between human life and the natural environment.

3.9. Showing the softness and agility of movement

Jiangnan folk dance is characterised by its softness, fluidity, and graceful curvilinear motion, with movements often following an “S-shaped” rhythm that embodies the aesthetic of the “three curves”—the curve of the torso, the arms, and the movement trajectory ^[5]. This stylistic feature is vividly reflected in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance. Its choreography centers on the coordinated twisting of the waist and hips, creating a continuous, pendulum-like rhythm that results in smooth, rounded visual dynamics typical of Jiangnan’s gentle movement style ^[12]. According to the Chinese Dance Journal: Jiangsu Volume ^[22], the fisherwoman’s movement “passing backward through flowers” accentuates the S-shaped body line, while the phrase “tracing a horizontal figure-eight” highlights circular shoulder and arm motions, both of which align with the delicate, flowing qualities valued in Jiangnan folk dance. Meanwhile, the clown character’s “horse-riding stance” preserves another facet of Jiangnan aesthetics—combining suppleness with strength—through exaggerated steps and rhythmic intensity, thereby adding contrast and vitality to the overall performance ^[12]. Beyond aesthetics, these smooth and agile movements facilitate group coordination and shared rhythm in community performances, reinforcing collective memory and fostering a sense of social cohesion. They also act as embodied expressions of Jiangnan cultural identity, transmitting subtle cultural values and regional aesthetics to both performers and audiences.

3.10. Continuing the tradition of costume colour and design

The costumes of Jiangnan folk dance predominantly feature cool hues such as blue and cyan, embodying the clarity and grace of water-town culture ^[5]. A distinctive characteristic is the use of patchwork, often manifested in garments like big-breasted shirts, drawstring skirts, and cropped trousers that reflect regional craftsmanship ^[1]. In the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, this sartorial tradition is retained while being adapted for stage presentation. According to the Chinese Dance Journal: Jiangsu Volume ^[22], the fisherwoman’s outfit typically consists of a blue calico patchwork top with a stand-up collar, paired with black trousers and an olive-green pleated skirt, projecting an image of composure and refinement. In contrast, the fisherwoman’s aunt wears attire patterned with bright red flowers and green leaves, creating a cheerful, dynamic stage presence. The clown’s costume draws inspiration from Jiangnan opera aesthetics, incorporating a black cap and voluminous lantern trousers to heighten comedic expression ^[19]. Overall, these costume designs not only align with the traditional aesthetic sensibilities of Jiangnan folk dance but also reinforce character differentiation and enhance the theatrical visuality of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance. Such visual codification of roles strengthens recognition of social structure and cultural values among both performers and audience.

3.11. Props use and symbolism

Tang (30) in “*The Change of Jiangsu Folk Dance from Countryside to Town*” highlights that Jiangnan folk dance effectively utilises props to enrich both visual expression and audience engagement. Typical props include flower drums, flower baskets, fishing tools, lanterns, and bamboo horses, all reflecting local labour and daily life ^[31]. The Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance exemplifies this practice. According to the Chinese Dance Journal: Jiangsu Volume ^[22], its core props comprise fish baskets, flower drums, folding fans, and handkerchiefs, which simultaneously convey character traits and enhance rhythmic interactivity. For instance, the fisherwoman’s aunt uses the flower drum to mark rhythm and energise the performance; the fisherwoman’s basket symbolises the local fishing livelihood, adding narrative depth; and the clown’s folding fan introduces comedic elements, heightening dramatic effect ^[12]. Through embodied interaction with

props, performers and spectators actively participate in cultural enactment, solidifying social cohesion and shared heritage.

3.12. Musical inheritance and regional embodiment

The music of Jiangnan folk dances is primarily built on silk and bamboo instruments, combined with folk melodies, producing gentle, lyrical tunes with a distinct water-region character ^[12]. According to Chinese Folk Dances: Jiangsu Volume ^[21], the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance inherits this musical tradition, integrating silk and bamboo with instruments such as the erhu, flute, and pipa, alongside local songs and flower drum rhythms, creating a layered, elegant, and melodious auditory experience. Tang ^[13] in “*A Comparative Study of Flower Drum Dance in the North and South Regions of Jiangsu Province*” notes that this dance also incorporates the singing style and expressive techniques of Anhui’s Fengyang Flower Drum, forming a composite musical style that blends regional authenticity with fusion elements. A representative example is the folk tune The Breeze of Blue Water Panders to Taihu Lake, whose fresh, lyrical melody complements the ‘S’-shaped movements and water-culture imagery in the choreography, enhancing both immersion and artistic expressiveness. Drum accompaniment further reinforces the rhythm, adding vitality and dynamism to the performance ^[1]. Music thus acts as a medium for emotional alignment and collective identification, connecting individuals to the broader community and its cultural history.

3.13. Multidimensional embodiment of cultural value

Jiangnan folk dance serves not only as a form of regional artistic expression but also as a medium for preserving collective memory, social ethics, and cultural heritage. As a representative example, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance reflects the aesthetic characteristics of Jiangnan culture while also demonstrating its broader cultural significance. This is evident in its social functions, representation of gender roles, depiction of family relationships, and its pathways of transmission and ongoing development. Moreover, by engaging performers and audiences in shared cultural rituals and embodied storytelling, the dance strengthens community identity and fosters an intergenerational sense of belonging.

3.14. Social functions

In traditional Jiangnan society, folk dances are often performed during ceremonial events such as temple fairs, festivals, and weddings, serving multiple purposes including praying for blessings, averting misfortune, offering sacrifices, and fostering community cohesion ^[34]. Due to its cheerful and festive nature, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance is frequently featured as a main programme of the Lantern Festival, expressing wishes for a bountiful harvest, health, and family reunion ^[12]. In “Forms and functions of traditional folk dance in Central Java”, Malarsih et al. ^[35] point out that this dance is widely performed at village temple fairs and folklore festivals, acting as an important means of strengthening community identity and cultural continuity. Furthermore, the dance carries an instructive function, conveying values such as diligence and family harmony through its character settings, prop symbolism, and movement language ^[19]. Through these performances, working people in the Jiangnan region not only celebrate life but also express their hopes for prosperity and happiness ^[11]. These collective performances also serve as a mechanism for intergenerational knowledge transfer, allowing local customs and social norms to be experienced and internalized by younger participants.

3.15. Gender roles and family relations

The Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance centers on three roles: ‘fisherwoman’, ‘fisher girl’, and ‘clown’. The embedded gender roles and family structure mirror traditional Jiangnan society, where men dominated public affairs and women managed the household ^[23]. Tan ^[12] notes that the costume colours and movement design of the female roles express cultural expectations of gentleness, virtue, and diligence, while the clown

role moderates the atmosphere, resolves conflicts through exaggerated gestures, and symbolises humour and reconciliation in family relations. Interactive movements, such as ‘passing the basket’ and ‘greeting’ between the fisherwoman and fisher girl, not only serve a performance function but also symbolically reflect mother-daughter relationships in traditional Jiangnan society. This role division and collaborative interaction reinforce the dance’s ethical and educational value, making it both an artistic display and a medium of cultural instruction (5,1). In doing so, the dance provides a performative space for reflecting and reinforcing social norms, gendered expectations, and family ethics within the community.

3.16. Inheritance and development

At the level of inheritance, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance exemplifies the oral transmission of Jiangnan folk dances through festivals and community folklore. According to Chinese Folk Dances: Jiangsu Volume [21], local artists often teach the dance within communities via lantern teams, creating a network of cultural memory in villages. This “learning through performance and festival practice” approach preserves both the vitality of the dance and the continuity of local traditions. In contemporary society, dance has evolved into a stage art, adapting its movements, music, costumes, and props to audience aesthetics and communication needs [19]. Despite modern challenges to traditional arts, the dance continues through cultural festivals, school programs, and intangible heritage projects [10]. Dong [33] in “*A study of the relationship between the expressions of folk-dance language art and culture*” highlights its role as a cultural symbol in Jiangnan, contributing to local identity and cultural confidence. Moreover, its continued performance fosters intergenerational engagement, allowing younger generations to experience and internalize traditional culture, thereby sustaining both memory and cultural identity in modern contexts.

4. Discussion

As a key component of Chinese folk dance, Jiangnan folk dance forms a complex cultural system shaped by historical evolution, regional ecology, ethnic blending, and local customs. Through literature review and analysis of the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, this study shows that Jiangnan folk dance not only exhibits diverse artistic styles but also carries profound cultural values in social and artistic expressions. Moreover, by engaging both performers and audiences, these dances foster shared cultural identity and intergenerational belonging.

Historically, Jiangnan folk dance demonstrates remarkable adaptability and integration, evolving from primitive ritual dances to martial styles in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, court influences in the Han and Tang dynasties, theatrical forms in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and contemporary stage adaptations. The Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance mirrors this trajectory, originating as a lantern dance, integrating elements from tea lanterns and Fengyang Flower Drums, and developing into a folk dance with distinctive regional and artistic features. This historical evolution not only reflects artistic adaptation but also preserves regional memory and cultural values across generations.

Ecological factors in the Jiangnan water region play a crucial role in shaping dance forms and aesthetics. By mirroring daily labor and ecological patterns, these dances reinforce shared cultural identity and facilitate emotional synchrony within communities. Low-lying terrain and dense waterways influence both local livelihoods and dance expression. Movements in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance simulate fishing, sculling, and netting, emphasizing water-inspired aesthetics through ‘S-shaped rhythms’, ‘three bends’, and waist-hip coordination, forming a graceful and fluid style.

In terms of movement and visual language, Jiangnan folk dances often display restrained, introverted elegance. Through differentiated roles—fisherwoman, fisherman’s aunt, and clown—the Fish Basket Flower

Drum Dance combines naturalistic labour movements with exaggerated folk entertainment, creating a dynamic 'life-art' balance with strong communicative and expressive power.

Costumes and props in Jiangnan folk dance integrate functionality and aesthetics. They act as semiotic tools, conveying social roles, ethical values, and regional identity, thereby supporting group cohesion and cultural continuity. Traditional fishermen's attire has evolved into stage costumes in the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance, with adjustments in color, cut, and material enhancing role identification. Props such as fish baskets, flower drums, and folding fans increase rhythm and visual appeal while symbolically enriching the dance narrative.

Musically, Jiangnan folk dance relies on silk-and-bamboo instruments, local melodies, and drum rhythms to create lyrical and flowing accompaniment. The Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance incorporates elements of Fengyang Flower Drum Opera alongside Southern Jiangsu folk songs, emphasizing improvisation and singer-dancer integration to form an immersive artistic experience.

Finally, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance reflects Jiangnan's social and cultural structure. The interplay of movement, music, and role interaction fosters communal belonging and maintains intergenerational cultural memory, illustrating the psychological functions of folk dance. It serves as a medium for blessings, entertainment, and community cohesion; its role interactions illustrate traditional gender and family ethics; and its oral transmission in festivals and local performances ensures cultural continuity. The dance demonstrates the vitality of Jiangnan folk culture through both heritage preservation and contemporary stage adaptation.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance as a representative case to systematically explore the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of folk dances in the Jiangnan region. Research reveals that Jiangnan folk dance constitutes a composite artistic system rooted in the water-village ecology. Its graceful rhythms, intricate musical structures, and poetic aesthetic expressions collectively embody the region's unique worldview, emotional temperament, and aesthetic ethos.

Through vivid reenactments of fishing life and ritualized expressions of human-nature harmony, the Fish Basket Flower Drum Dance epitomizes the regional characteristics of Jiangnan folk dance. Its choreography, costume design, prop usage, and musical structure collectively construct a symbolic system blending ecological imagery with social experience. These symbolic elements allow dance to function as a repository of collective memory and social identity, transmitting both aesthetic and ethical values. This not only preserves the core aesthetic and symbolic value of Jiangnan dance but also expands its expressive dimensions through stage performance and educational dissemination.

Culturally, Jiangnan folk dance functions both as an artistic medium and a living repository of social ethics, gender structures, and collective memory. The Fisherman's Basket Drum Dance exemplifies folk dance's multifaceted role in entertainment, ritual, and moral education. Through intangible cultural heritage designation, educational integration, and stage reinterpretation, this dance demonstrates enduring vitality and adaptability within contemporary contexts. Such practices highlight the dual role of Jiangnan folk dance: as an art form and as a medium for reinforcing community cohesion, cultural identity, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Theoretically, this study reveals the mechanisms through which regional dances emerge and evolve within the interplay of ecological environments, historical memory, and social structures. Practically, it offers new reference pathways for the preservation and innovation of folk dance in modern society. Future

research may further explore directions such as digital mediation, urban recontextualisation, and cross-cultural transmission, investigating the regenerative mechanisms and contemporary expressions of Jiangnan folk dance within global cultural exchange.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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