

# The Aesthetic Characteristics of Chama Dance in Inner Mongolia of China

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## Abstracts

Chama is a Tibetan Buddhist religious dance ritual that spread from Tibet to Inner Mongolia, the main purpose is to spread the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism through dance, drive away evil spirits for people, and pray for peace. The objective of this research was to analyze the aesthetic characteristics of Chama dance. It used the qualitative research method which collected data by observation and interview methods.

The research result was the Chama dance has gradually formed with distinctive Mongolian characteristics. Specifically, the sacrificial ceremony of shamanism, the original religious belief of the Mongolian people. Chama gradually formed its own unique formula and distinctive characteristics, which transformed the dull teachings and abstract philosophies of Buddhism into tangible images and plots, and presented gods and ghosts, heaven and hell.

**Keywords:** The Aesthetic Characteristics; Chama Dance; Inner Mongolia of China

## Introduction

"Chama" is a religious dance ceremony of Tibetan Buddhism, which is a form of dance to promote Buddhism after the integration of Mongolian and Tibetan cultures. Chama is a comprehensive Tibetan Buddhist art that combines dance, music, chanting, masks and costumes. It is a dance performed in temples by lamas dressed in ornate costumes and wearing exaggerated masks representing gods. In Inner Mongolia, the performance time of "Chama" is usually held in the large Dharma meetings or Buddhist festivals of Tibetan Buddhist temples, and the "Chama" dance is generally performed only 1-2 times a year, which depends on the actual situation of the monasteries. According to the author's investigation of Tibetan Buddhist temples in Inner Mongolia, there are 21 temples in 6 cities and subordinate counties of Hohhot city, Ordos City, Alashan League Left Banner, Bayannaoer League, Ulanhot City and Tongliao City in Inner Mongolia with Chama dance, and each temple will hold a Chama dance performance of varying sizes according to the situation of the temple (Zou, 2005 : 254).

## Research Objectives

To analyze the aesthetic characteristics of Chama dance.

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## **Research Methodology**

### **Population and Sample**

This article mainly analyzes the aesthetic characteristics of Chama dance from the whole ritual, the content of expression, the body vocabulary and the mask. The investigators of this paper need to understand the whole Chama dance ritual, understand the content and movement characteristics of Chama dance, and understand the mask of Chama. Therefore, this paper will use the interview method to investigate the Chama inheritors and abbots of Tibetan Buddhist temples. Details are as follows:

Jia Shangqin, national "Chama" inheritor. In 1985, he began to learn "Chama" dance, and carried out the sorting and research of "Chama" dance, collecting and sorting out a large number of first-hand materials of "Chama" dance. Familiar with Chama dance ritual process, Chama dance content and Chama dance movements.

Ao Teng Tuya, provincial Chama inheritor. Chama mask model for 33 years. In 2000, he was responsible for the restoration of the old Chama mask, and in 2006, he began the production of the new Chama mask.

Nari Su, Lama, Abbot of Garutu Temple, Ordos. Since 1990, he has studied Chama dance for 33 years and is familiar with the ritual flow, Chama dance and dance content.

Dabhiratu, Lama, Abbot of the Alashan Sharza Temple. Since 1990, have studied Chama dance for 33 years. I am familiar with the process of Chama ceremony, and have a good understanding of the role meaning of Chama dance and the history of Chama dance.

### **Research tools**

All 4 participants were interviewed in a semi-structured interview format of 1 to 1. The main contents of the interview are:

- 1) Formation of Chama dance
- 2) Process of Chama dance ritual
- 3) Performance content of Chama dance
- 4) Body vocabulary of Chama dance
- 5) The mask of Chama dance

On July 7, 2022, the author conducted an interview with Mr. Jia Shangqin, the national Chama inheritor.

On July 10, 2022, the author conducted an interview with Ms. Ao Teng Tuya, a provincial Chama inheritor.

On September 20, 2022, the author conducted an interview with the abbot of the Alashan Sharza Temple, Dabshiratu.

On November 15, 2022, the author conducted an interview with Nari Su, Abbot of Garutu Temple in Ordos.

## Research Findings

### 1. Formation of Chama dance

Chama originated from the Tibetan Buddhist dance "Qiangmu", and gradually formed a Mongolian culture and art form after it was introduced into Mongolia. The formation and development of Chama is closely related to the social and cultural soil. As a regional minority art, it is restricted and influenced by Inner Mongolia's specific natural geographical environment, ethnic history, cultural tradition and surrounding regional culture, so as to reflect its unique artistic personality and aesthetic characteristics.

#### 1.1 Inner Mongolia's natural environment and humanity

The Inner Mongolia Plateau is a vast area, located in the northern border of China from the northeast to the southwest oblique, in a narrow shape, longitude and latitude east from 126°04' east, west to 97°12' east, across the longitude of 28°52', east-west straight distance of more than 2,400 kilometers; South from 37°24' north latitude, north to 53°23' north latitude, longitudinally-occupying 15°59' latitude, linear distance 1700 kilometers. It borders eight provinces of China to the south and east, and Mongolia and Russia to the north, with a border length of 4,200 kilometers. The average altitude is about 1,100 meters, and the total area is 1.183 million square kilometers.



Figure 2: Inner Mongolia region map made by Xing Yupeng picture 2023.6

Due to the northern location of the Mongolian Plateau, higher terrain, far from the sea, and the border is blocked by mountains, so the climate belongs to the characteristics of continental climate: cold and long winter, very little hot weather in summer, wind and sand in spring, less precipitation. Generally speaking, the climate of the grassland changes rapidly, there are more disasters, landslides, mud-rock flows; Avalanches, blizzards and wind disasters often occur. "The combined effect and comprehensive influence of these factors constitute the unique geographical environment characteristics of the Mongolian Plateau, such as relatively closed and monotonous surface structure, harsh natural conditions, relatively fragile ecological environment, and relatively low tolerance for humans and animals. This kind of natural

geographical environment has a direct and profound impact on the Mongolian people. Due to the harsh environment, in order to survive, the Mongolian people have fought with nature for a long time, honed their will to survive, and made them open-minded and bold.

The special regional environment and characteristics of Inner Mongolia gave birth to the rich and colorful grassland culture, and the grassland culture influenced the artistic characteristics and ideological connotation of Mongolian Chama. At the first High-level Forum on Grassland Culture Research in China, experts and scholars have summarized the spiritual connotation of grassland culture as three points: The first is "advocating nature". The Grassland nationality highly depend on the natural nomadic production and life style, so that the Grassland nationality have an attitude of admiration and reverence for natural objects. The second is "practicing freedom". In the relatively broad and free-living environment, the factor of freedom has been imperceptibly deeply cast in the national character of the Mongolian people, and has become the goal that people pursue and the object of practice in real life. Third, the spirit of "hero worship". The grassland people have the cultural tradition of advocating heroes, venerating heroes and advocating heroes are particularly prominent in the traditional culture of the grassland people. For example, many Mongolians still like to use "hero" (Batel) as their name, and in the Chama dance, there is also a god representing "Batel", shining heroism. The above three kinds of spirits are related to each other, and together build the core idea of grassland culture, reflecting the unique national character and aesthetic pursuit of the Mongolian nation, with distinct national attributes.

#### 1.2 Formation of the Chama dance

In the 13th century, Tibetan Buddhism began to spread into Mongolia, and "Qiangmu" was also introduced, but later because of the retreat of Buddhism, "Qiangmu" also interrupted the spread in Mongolia. By the 16th century A.D., Altan Khan had invited the third Dalai Lama from Tibet, Suo Nam Jiso, to the Inner Mongolia Naturalization City (today's Hohhot city) to spread Buddhism began, Tibetan Buddhism is once again spreading across the Mongolian plateau, "Qiangmu" also spread widely, and continuously absorbed and integrated the shamanic art believed by the Mongolian people and the elements of Mongolian folk dance, folk music and folk Musical Instruments, adding a lot of content of Mongolian cultural beliefs, and gradually forming a religious dance with Mongolian characteristics, blending Mongolian and Tibetan religious culture and music and dance culture as one.

With the wide spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia, a group of outstanding Mongolian religious figures and lamas scholars emerged, which further accelerated the development of Chama dance in Inner Mongolia. Among them: Urat West Public Banner (present Urat Front Banner of Bayannur City) Mozhigen Temple III Mozhigen Living Buddha Rosandan Bygyaltsen (1717-1766) was a representative and outstanding Buddhist figure. He was a man of extraordinary wisdom and profound knowledge; As a living Buddha with deep attainments in Tibetan Buddhist culture, he translated a large number of Buddhist classics throughout his life. At the same time, according to the absence of Mongolian Chama, the Mongolian monks had practical difficulties in arranging Chama dance, which was not conducive to the spread of Chama dance, and the Mongolian people could not accept and have a deeper understanding of the rituals and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. Many times to the Tibetan Buddhist monk living Buddha in Tibet proposed the idea of composing Mongolian Chama dance, and finally overcome various obstacles and difficulties, adopted the essence of traditional Mongolian music and dance. In addition, traditional Mongolian Musical Instruments

were included in the accompaniment of Chama, which broke the traditional shackles of "Qiangmu" and created the first Mongolian Buddhist music and dance art Chama, which was favored by the Mongolian people.

In the "Annals of Chinese Dance · Inner Mongolia Volume" recorded, "Alxa Guangzong Temple I Gegen Awang Dorji, From 1764 to 1778, he went to Tibet, Qinghai, Beijing, Xi 'an and Mount Wutai to study the classics. The artistic forms in various Buddhist celebrations and ceremonies should be studied intensively. After returning, on the basis of learning from others and absorbing the nutrients of Mongolian song and dance art, he began to carefully prepare and repeatedly practice the Chama of the temple. After years of hard work, this religious art with regional characteristics finally came out in 1778. (Edited by the Editorial Committee of Chinese Dance, 2004) It is not difficult to find that Chama in Inner Mongolia is not simply a direct copy of the Tibetan "Qiangmu", but a combination of CHAMA with the Mongolian dance art, thus producing a Tibetan Buddhist dance with Mongolian characteristics.

## **2. Aesthetic characteristics of Chama dance**

### **2.1 The grand, rugged beauty of Chama dance**

Grand and rough are the characteristics of art form. It is opposite to delicate and implicit artistic form. The grandiosity and roughness of Chama means that it is large in scale, magnificent in momentum, full of wild power, and has great deterrent power. The content of the performance is not pretentious, not disguised, profound meaning. profound meaning. In fact, this aesthetic consciousness is also the connotation of the Mongolian people's spirit.

First of all, in terms of the scale of the performance of the Chama dance, although the content and time of the performance of the Chama dance in various temples are different, they all have a grand scale and complete rituals. Ritual is the most concerned object of anthropologists. It is a kind of collective, compulsory and recognized activity for human survival needs. Most religious dances are almost completed in ritual, which is a religiously prescribed act to achieve religious purposes. Ritual activities play a psychological function to help people recover their mental balance after being disturbed by death, illness, economic and social difficulties. For example, the Dazhao Temple in Hohhot's "June 15 Dharma Assembly" lasted eight days, and the Chama dance was performed on the last day of the assembly. Another example is the "Mani Fa Meeting" called by Ordos Junge, Among them, on the eighth day of July and the beginning of July 9, two days are Chama dance performances.

The scene of the Chama dance performance is large and grand. For example, the Great call of Hohhot started from the Fa meeting on the first day to recite the "Dawei Diamond Sutra" in the temple, and held the "Ba Ling" Fa events on the seventh day. The ritual of sending ghosts is an important ritual of exorcising ghosts and praying for blessings in Tibetan Buddhism, which symbolizes exorcising ghosts and relieving human suffering and troubles. On the morning of the eighth day, the lamas finish chanting sutras, walk out of the sutras hall and walk around the temple clockwise, and then begin to perform the Chama dance. The number of lamas participating in the Chama performance can be as few as dozens and as many as hundreds. There were thousands of spectators and believers. Throughout the ritual, dance constrains time, space and power, and controls other artistic categories to serve themselves from both aesthetic and non-aesthetic perspectives. The intense ritual nature of the Chama dance enables people to resonate, reach consensus, and express emotions. It can easily integrate individuals and even the whole society closely, so that its grand scene is manifested through this sacred cohesion.

Third, the body vocabulary of Chama dance also reflects the majestic momentum of heroism. The movement and posture of the Chama dance, representing the "hero" or "Yama" messenger of the god, the movement is steady, heavy, slow, extremely imposing. For example, holding a warrior's knife and shield, representing the image of the hero "Batelle", the body is tall and upright, the head is held high, and the heroic divine power is expressed through the rough fighting and dancing posture. For another example, in the dance segment of the messenger of "Yama", the music is slow and solemn, the dance movements are slow and steady, and the sword and sword are waved in the hand, symbolizing the removal of all the demons and ghosts that hinder the gods from coming to the earth and showing the power of God.

Fourth, the rough, free and easy beauty of Chama dance body vocabulary. Chama dance has the accumulation of Tibetan traditional dance culture, representing the movement of swinging arms and half turning over in place and the evolution of the movement, and has the characteristics of the traditional Mongolian dance culture, which always dances around the rhythm of "circle" from top to bottom, front to back and left. The overall style is rough, free and dignified, showing the original and representative of Mongolian folk dance. The images of deities in Chama dance have personalized characteristics. From the point of view of the movements of the dance, it absorbs the movements of the Mongolian wrestlers in the ring and the factors of shamanism dance. The range of hands swinging is large, and the movement is more forward and backward, and the main movements are waving hands, stomping, turning and jumping. For example, the deer God and the cow God symbolize the beauty and auspiciousness of the human world. In this dance, the music is brisk and lively with a strong sense of rhythm. The dance combines the music rhythm with light jumping and rotating, which has a strong dancability and reveals the wild beauty of rough and free.



Figure 3: Bird and Beast God Dance in Chama Photo Source: Fan Di taken at Wu shen temple, Ordos 2023.7

## 2.2 The ferocious beauty of the Chama dance

The fierceness is one of the important aesthetic feelings of Chama, and it is the unique and inherent aesthetic form of Chama. The esthetician Li Zehou pointed out: "In that seemingly ferocious threat mystery, there is a thick historical force." It is with this overwhelming and unstoppable force of history that its mysterious terror becomes beautiful -- sublime."

Chama dance is performed by the lama wearing a mask. Here, the mask is no longer a simple mask. It has become connected with "God" and become a materialized symbol of God, a bridge between man and God, and an ideal form of integration between man and God. When people put on masks, they seem to enter the world of selflessness and become omnipotent gods.

In Chama dance, in addition to Buddha, Bodhisattvas, monks, saints and a few other good face masks, as well as animal masks such as birds and beasts, the main is the fierce face mask composed of the original god and the dharma god, whose image is mostly ferocious, scary, stern and fierce. They wear human skull crowns on their heads, and look at people in a hallucinatory image, with a majestic face and fangs, holding various rituals made of human organs in their hands, tying their waists with beads on their heads, or wrapping themselves around poisonous snakes to express the suppression of demons. These masks are exaggerated, strange, and have a powerful deterrent. The appearance of this shape is influenced by two aspects. First, Tibetan Buddhism believes that the biggest enemy in the world is greed, anger and delusion in the human heart. Chamma dance is not only to destroy demons, but also to guide people to get rid of greed, anger and delusion. As the image expression of Buddhist teachings, Chama is deeply influenced by Buddhist tantric rituals. Therefore, the mask is exaggerated, ferocious, and has deterrence, meaning the power of destroying demons and promoting the great virtues of Buddhism. Second, originating from Tibetan Buddhist statues, the religious function of those Dharma protection vajra is to guard the Dharma, protect monks and believers, and suppress evil spirits, and the power of the divine force is the manifestation of the religious function of the fierce God, and is also the focus of the aesthetic.





Figure 4: Chama Mask inheritors in the production of a fierce phase mask Photo source: Alxa Left Banner Cultural Center provided 2022.7

The stern, dark and absurd horror of Chama dance mask is the rebellion and alienation from the traditional sense of beauty, a disguised beauty, a specific heavy and dark beauty. The mask will connect people and God as one, so that people and God dance, so that the gods reside in the fierce mask, in order to achieve the effect of subdue ghosts, exorcise demons, and protect themselves. It is not only the embodiment of terror and evil, but also the representative of tenderness and kindness, it is the symbol of fear and intimidation externally, and the divine force of warm care internally. This dual religious concept, emotion and imagination is condensed in such a strange and fierce image. Although terrifying, it still retains a great aesthetic charm. This kind of strong contrast and high unity between beauty and ugliness, love and hate, evil and good makes Qiang filled with great aesthetic charm in the fierce, dark, absurd and horrible atmosphere.

### 2.3 The truth, goodness and beauty of Chama dance

"Chama" is a religious ceremony in the Tantra of Tibetan Buddhism, which is very sacred. Tantra teaches that not only can everyone "become a Buddha", but also "become a Buddha immediately" and "become a Buddha in the body". A "Buddha" is a person who has perfected his practice and attained great enlightenment. Although most of the plots performed by Chama are religious stories, these stories reflect the Mongolian people's life emotions, aspirations and exploration of the meaning of life, and also reflect the humanized expression of God.



For example, in *Mirayinchama*, the play celebrates Milarepa, a legendary figure of Lamaism. According to Tibetan historical records, Milarepa was a prominent monk of the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism in the 12th century. In addition to the main character Milarepa, there are black old men, white haired old men, hunters, hunting dogs, deer and so on. Its storyline is: The black old man and the white-haired old man lived by hunting, and they were fond of killing, leading hunters into the mountains to hunt every day. One day they were chasing a deer with dogs, and this deer was saved by Milarepa. Milarepa preached to the hunter, and under the influence of Buddhism, the white-haired old man felt compassion, so he put down the butcher's knife and became a Buddha. The black old man at first ridiculed Milarepa, but finally repented under the advice of the white-haired old man and converted to Tibetan Buddhism. Finally, the two hunters gave their bows to Milarepa and danced together in a joyous dance.

To abandon the superstitious factor is actually to convey a higher realm of life. Therefore, the performance of Chama dance is, in a sense, a leading activity for the growth of life, and it urges people to abandon the false, evil and ugly and pursue the true, the good and the beautiful. In short, whether its worldview and methodology are scientific or not, its nature of exploring the meaning of life is unquestionable.

#### 2.4 The mysterious beauty of Chama dance

Animism is the reverence and worship of human beings to nature in primitive society, believing that all things have soul and spirit. In front of the powerful nature, people feel weak, humble and helpless, which leads to their fear and worship of some abilities of animals and plants unconsciously, and thus produces the worship of primitive gods. Later people summed up this phenomenon as "animism".

Animism has been hidden in the Mongolian people's ideology and religious belief since ancient times. They not only created many kind-hearted and loving gods with their own imagination to help them deter and expel the evil spirits that brought them disasters, but also created a series of rituals and songs to please the gods. Chama is one of the religious rituals that contain the aspirations and emotions of the Mongolian people. It shows the philosophy of life, the teachings of Buddhism, the gods and ghosts, the present life and the next life, the good and the evil through the form of dance. It left the original "animism", imprinted with totem worship, god worship, ghost worship and other early human cultural concepts. It reveals a strong religious color and a strong mysterious atmosphere of ancient human production and life.

The Mongolian plateau is vast and inaccessible, and the Mongolian ancestors fought against the nature with their nomadic lifestyle. Under the vast sky on the grassland, the Mongolian people personalize the cattle, horses, dogs, deer, birds and other birds and beasts that accompany them at the same time give supernatural powers, so there are many bird and animal god masks in Chama mask. These shapes of birds and beasts not only reflect the Mongolian ancestors' worship and reverence for nature, but also reflect the will and desire to conquer and transform nature. For example, the "deer god dance" in Chama simulates the character and habits of deer, and displays a totem worship and exorcism by the image of birds and animals spirits. Deer God is also the Mongolian totem will, on behalf of the auspicious kind of peace, its dance movement image, highly skilled, vivid, mask modification more make the Chama dance covered with a layer of mysterious veil.

## Discussion

After the Chama dance was introduced into Inner Mongolia from Tibet, through the changes of geographical environment, social environment and production environment, as well as the continuous modification of generations of Mongolian Chama masters and the integration of rich and grassland culture, the Chama dance has gradually formed with distinctive Mongolian characteristics. Specifically, the sacrificial ceremony of shamanism, the original religious belief of the Mongolian people, is retained in the Chama dance ceremony (Wen, 2004 : 30). The content of the Chama dance is added to the Mongolian legend, the role of the dance is added to the heroic image of the Mongolian people, and the body vocabulary of the dance is integrated into the folk dance (Jia, 2022 : 41).

Chama dance embodies the unique cultural spirit and national temperament of the Mongolian people, is the mutual coexistence of Tibetan Buddhism and Inner Mongolia local culture, and is the unity of God and human dialogue (Annals of Chinese Dance Editorial Committee, 2014 : 20). After a long time, Chama gradually formed its own unique formula and distinctive characteristics, which transformed the dull teachings and abstract philosophies of Buddhism into tangible images and plots, and presented gods and ghosts, heaven and hell, this life and the next life with concrete plots (Liu, 2010 : 17). The grand and mysterious majesty of the Chama dance; Rough, rustic movements; The story content that embodies the truth, kindness and beauty and the terrifying mask reflect the unique personality of the Mongolian people, which is deep, internal, honest, brave, bold, resolute and brave. Chama dance is the aggregation of the Mongolian character, the Mongolian spirit and the Mongolian temperament (Li, 2001 : 62), as well as the concentrated embodiment of the Mongolian people's life, thoughts and feelings, psychological quality and aesthetic taste.

## Recommendation

### 1. Practical Recommendations

For the practical recommendation about this research, begin the research by conducting a thorough literature review. Explore existing academic papers, books, and articles related to Chama dance in Inner Mongolia. This will help you understand the historical context and existing research on the topic. Conduct interviews with Chama dancers, choreographers, and experts in the field to gather their perspectives on the aesthetics of Chama dance. You can also design surveys to collect quantitative data on audience perceptions. Document Chama dance performances through photography and audiovisual recordings. These records can serve as valuable visual aids for your research and help in analyzing the aesthetic elements of the dance.

### 2. Recommendation for future research

The future research should study in-Depth Movement Analysis: Explore the intricate movements and choreography of Chama dance in greater detail. Use advanced motion-capture technology and biomechanical analysis to understand the precise mechanics and aesthetics of dance movements. Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies: Conduct cross-cultural comparisons between Chama dance and other traditional dance forms from different regions, cultures, or ethnic groups. This can shed light on the universality or uniqueness of Chama dance aesthetics. Aesthetic Evolution Over Time: Investigate how the aesthetic characteristics of Chama dance have evolved over the years. Analyze the impact of contemporary influences and globalization

on the dance form's aesthetics. Costume and Adornment Analysis: Focus on the aesthetics of Chama dance costumes, masks, and adornments. Explore the symbolism, craftsmanship, and cultural significance of these elements in relation to the dance. Audience Perception and Experience: Investigate the audience's perspective by conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups. Understand how different audiences perceive the aesthetics of Chama dance and how these perceptions might vary across demographics.

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