

## **Sinicization of Ballet: Guangzhou Ballet company's ballet drama *The Banner***

**Yuanyuan Liu<sup>1,2</sup>, Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> College of Music and Dance, Guangzhou City Guangzhou Business College, Guang Zhou, China

2022273832@student.uitm.edu.my, mohdkipli@uitm.edu.my  
Tel: 8613602412687

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the Sinicization of ballet, focusing on Guangzhou Ballet's production of *The Banner*. The work exemplifies cultural fusion, blending classical Western ballet techniques with Chinese storytelling, revolutionary themes, and Lingnan cultural elements. This study examines how *The Banner* achieves cultural authenticity and artistry by employing qualitative interviews with the creative team, and audiences. It contributes to understanding how global art forms adapt and evolve within localized contexts, enriching the dialogue on cultural hybridity and cross-cultural artistic adaptation.

**Keywords:** Sinicization; Guangzhou Ballet; Revolutionary Art

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## **1.0 Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of Ballet's Evolution**

Ballet as an art form has undergone a remarkable evolution. Initially serving as a ceremonial and courtly display, ballet began to solidify its narrative and technical foundations during the reign of King Louis XIV in 17th-century France (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2016). Ballet made its entry into China in the mid-20th century, primarily through Russian influences. Pyotr Gusev, a renowned Russian dancer and choreographer, played a pivotal role in establishing the Beijing Dance School in 1954, which laid the foundation for professional ballet training in China (Shan Chou & Singh, 2022). Russian ballet's emphasis on precision and discipline complemented traditional Chinese performing arts, enabling a unique synthesis of techniques. All this means was the beginning of the Sinicization of the dance form. Bodies like the Beijing Dance Academy and the Shanghai Dance School are important for developing Chinese ballet. These bodies adopted all traditional ballet techniques but also found some influence from the local dramatic performances, like the *Peking Opera*, to bring the performance to the regions (Heyang et al., 2021). Prominent works like *The Red Detachment of Women* and *Raise the Red Lantern* illustrate this fusion, encapsulating the distinctive cultural and historical stories specific to China. This transformation of ballet highlights its potential to function as a vehicle for safeguarding and advancing national identity within an increasingly globalized artistic context.

### **1.2 Sinicization Concept**

Sinicization, in performing arts, refers to the process of taking foreign cultural styles and blending them with Chinese ideas and values. The blending of Western methods with traditional Chinese parts makes works known worldwide while being true to Chinese culture. Sinicization is expressed differently in various art types, ranging from painting and drama, music, and even dance to show how China

may synthesize and develop new cultures (Suehiro, 2017). With ballet, Sinicization means the style change but focuses on imparting Chinese story, theme, and art sentiment, combined with its techniques.

### 1.3 Research Focus

This study is therefore based on Guangzhou Ballet's *The Banner*, which is the epitome of Chinese ballet in performance. The *Banner* is one of the productions that can be described as taking place during the 1927 Guangzhou Uprising, which uses the stories of Chinese revolutions alongside the traditional Western methods of performing ballet, hence making it a historic and creative performance (FitDance, 2024). It is the ballet's dance, music, and themes that are presented to show how different cultures come together; that mix realistic revolutionary ideas with romantic themes. This study focuses on the way *The Banner* puts together various elements, adding to the greater discourse concerning cultural mixing and how international art styles fit into a specific local setting. The production, written by Yu Ping and created by a skilled crew including composer Yang Fan, stage designers Qin Liyun and Ren Dongsheng, and costume designer Cui Xiaodong, closely resurfaces the manner, human feelings, and fight scenes of those days. It provides a powerful visual and contemplative experience (FitDance, 2024). Working with such a skilled team exhibits a commitment to both good art as well as real cultural representation in *The Banner*. The ballet incorporates the characteristics of oriental art, combining freehand and virtual reality elements with modern stage techniques to innovate and transform ballet as an art form (Lai Times, 2021). The ballet's integration of oriental art and modern stage techniques suggests a deliberate effort to redefine ballet, blending traditional and contemporary elements to resonate with diverse audiences. The creation of the *Banner* highlights enduring red cultural genes while incorporating a modern aesthetic, vividly capturing the revolutionary martyrs' lofty ideals with both passion and historical depth (Lai Times, 2021). Through its innovative fusion of tradition and modernity, *Banner* honors its historical legacy and reimagines ballet as a dynamic and culturally resonant art form for contemporary audiences.

### 1.4 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

*This paper aims to explore how The Banner achieves cultural authenticity and artistry by integrating Chinese cultural elements into classical ballet by focusing on the creative processes and perspectives of its production team.*

#### Research Objectives

- 1.To explore how the creative team of *The Banner* describes their approach to integrating Chinese cultural elements into the ballet's choreography, music, and staging.
- 2.To evaluate the creative team's perceptions of the cultural authenticity and artistic integration achieved in blending Chinese cultural elements with Western ballet techniques in *The Banner*.

#### Research Questions

- 1.How do members of the creative team of *The Banner* describe their process of integrating Chinese cultural elements into the ballet?
- 2.How do members of the creative team evaluate the cultural authenticity and artistic integration of *The Banner*?

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Historical Context of Sinicization in Art

The concept of Sinicization has a deep historical resonance in Chinese arts, signifying the adaptation and integration of foreign cultural elements into Chinese aesthetics, values, and philosophies. This has, in turn, contributed significantly to the development of different types of artistic disciplines, including drama, music, and dance (Cheng, 2021). Sinicization maintains the culture's identity and modifies the aesthetic aspects by adding features that appeal to a regional audience. In the case of performing arts, Sinicization is a kind of hybrid in which traditional Chinese topics blend with Western artistic expressions. For instance, the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, first performed in 1964, is a landmark production about the Chinese Civil War illustrating this synthesis (China Story, 2019). A ballet of revolutionary themes united with the precision and technical discipline of Western ballet forms this ballet. It fuses Chinese folk dance, operatic narration, and symbolic imagery to include the use of red tones to denote resilience and revolutionary fervor (Ren, 2021). For instance, *Raise the Red Lantern*, choreographed in the early 2000s, combines classical ballet with traditional Chinese music and visual motifs drawn from Peking Opera (Morgan, 2019). This blends the cultural content with technical innovation in performance.

The theoretical underpinning of Sinicization in arts can be interpreted by Cultural Hybridity Theory and Artistic Adaptation. According to Cultural Hybridity Theory, cultural identities are fluid; constantly reconstituting through contact and interaction between two cultural traditions (Kraidy, 2002). Using the context of ballet, this then explains how Chinese elements coexist with Western techniques to produce an art form that transcends its origins. Artistic adaptation, on the other hand, highlights the transformation of an art form into harmony with new cultural contexts while keeping its essence. This framework is specifically applicable to Sinicized ballets because it underscores the balance between retaining traditional techniques and introducing localized narratives and aesthetics (Tomasello, 1999). Prior studies on *The Red Detachment of Women* and *Raise the Red Lantern* highlight the successful integration of Chinese cultural elements into Western ballet, preserving cultural identity and achieving global appeal. However, these works often overlook challenges like superficial representations and audience perceptions; this research addresses these gaps through *The Banner*, using Cultural Hybridity Theory and Artistic Adaptation frameworks to explore how Sinicization balances cultural integrity with artistic modernization.

### 2.2 Challenges of Authentic Integration

Middle-aged women aged 50–59 form a distinct demographic in e-commerce due to their preference for authenticity, trust, and emotional resonance.

### 2.3 Impulse Buying Behavior

Impulse buying, characterized by unplanned purchasing triggered by emotional stimuli, is heavily influenced by visually engaging advertisements in this demographic.

### 2.4 The Kano Model

Despite its potential to enliven artistic forms, the process of Sinicization faces significant challenges concerning achieving authentic integration. One primary risk is the superficial representation of cultural elements without a sense of their meaning or origin (Lopez-Littleton & Blessett, 2015). Such missteps have led to performances that lack authenticity and fail to resonate with their audiences. The issue goes beyond ballet and crosses all bounds of cultural adaptations. One glaring example would be Disney's live-action *Mulan* of 2020. This adaptation received backlash for its stereotypical, even fake Chinese culture because it could not delve very deep (Yang & Yang, 2024). For example, the utilization of a phoenix as a spiritual mentor was inconsistent with traditional Chinese folklore practiced in the *Mulan* story, which emphasized family loyalty and self-sacrifice instead of magical features (Chen & Liu, 2023). These inaccuracies excluded Chinese audiences and missed portraying the culture in the best possible light in the eyes of global spectators.

Similar challenges occur in ballet when productions try to merge Chinese themes without a strong cultural footing. Works that blend the superficial elements of Western ballet with Chinese motifs run the risk of watering down the very essence of both traditions. This issue is indicative of the need for cultural depth and sensitivity in the adaptation process. Authentic integration requires understanding and acceptance of the cultural elements being assimilated and their liaison with the technical framework of the art form and its narrative command. Guangzhou Ballet's *The Banner* is a fine example of work against these challenges. Unlike the artificial adaptations, *The Banner* reveals a more careful attitude towards Sinicization, integrating revolution themes, Lingnan folk music, and visual Chinese motifs into its choreography and stage setting. Such a production highlights that cultural fusion may reach authenticity because both the foreign art form and the local culture being represented retain their integrity. Authentic integration also carries challenges in audience perceptions. In cross-cultural adaptations, audiences will bring their expectations and biases in culture, which can dictate how a performance is received by the audience (Deborah, 2024). For instance, audiences who are familiar with Western ballet may view Sinicized productions as deviant departures from what is normal, while domestic audiences may criticize them for having insufficient grounding in Chinese traditions. Therefore, in any aspect of this film's production, be it narrative or visual design, there needs to be authentic thorough planning. Sinicization faces challenges of superficial representation, as seen in global adaptations like Disney's *Mulan*, which failed to authentically portray Chinese culture. *The Banner*, however, exemplifies how revolutionary themes and Lingnan aesthetics can achieve cultural authenticity, aligning with Cultural Hybridity Theory. This study builds on such examples to explore strategies for deeper integration while addressing audience biases and expectations.

## 3.0 Methodology

This research has applied a qualitative approach in discussing the way by which *The Banner* attains cultural authenticity and artistry by introducing Chinese elements into classical ballet. This research has focused on carrying out five semi-structured interviews only with the creative team of *The Banner*, to understand their creativity and insight regarding cultural integration. It consisted of interviews with a choreographer, a dancer, a composer, a stage designer, and a costume designer, who contributed significantly to the production. The interviews were conducted over a month, and each session lasted for around 10-15 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to have a definitive shape to the interview while also providing the flexibility needed since the research is interpretive. The conversations have touched on the Chinese cultural elements involved in the ballet, including revolutionary themes and Lingnan aesthetics, which are interwoven into the choreography, staging, and thematic development of the ballet. The thematic analysis applied to the interview data has identified patterns and insights from creative intent, strategies used to blend cultural elements in the output, and perceptions of the artistic success of the product, *The Banner*. The approach has confirmed depth in the focused exploration as the production team contributes toward the Sinicization process and has provided an all-encompassing understanding of the culture and artistic dimensions of the performance.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Research Question 1

The table summarizes *The Banner's* fusion of Western ballet with Chinese themes, highlighting the 'red spirit' through choreography and Lingnan motifs in design and rhythm to ensure cultural authenticity.

Keywords/Phrases	Sub-Themes	Themes
"Revolutionary ideals," "red spirit"	Emphasis on historical authenticity	Embedding Revolutionary Themes: Integration of historical narratives into choreography and storytelling.
"Lingnan culture," "traditional aesthetics"	Fusion of local cultural motifs	Integrating Chinese Aesthetics: Incorporating regional cultural elements like Lingnan music and visual motifs.

Theme 1: Embedding Revolutionary Themes

The interview data revealed a strong interest in transmitting the "red spirit" of the 1927 Guangzhou Uprising. Choreographers mentioned that they attempted to depict the fervor of the times by designing movements that would symbolize strength in unity. For example, one of the participants mentioned, "We used sharp, angular movements to signify struggle and sacrifice, paired with flowing sequences to depict hope and perseverance." This choreography, as done, was deliberately founded on the duality of realism and romanticism that had dominated the ballet's narrative structure. Another interviewee emphasizes the importance of embodiment for revolutionary ideals: "Every movement is a dialogue with history; we wanted audiences to feel the weight of the martyrs' sacrifices." This insight shows that the creative team has carefully placed historical and ideological depth in the performance so that it will be culturally and emotionally resonant.

## Theme 2: Integrating Chinese Aesthetics

Participants often reflected on how they would relate the traditional themes of the Lingnan culture to the ballet. The designer explained that "they drew inspiration for the stage setup from the buildings and nature of Lingnan, put together with symbolic colors and textures of Chinese art". The dancers will then describe how movements taken from dances in China, later take on shapes that become compatible with the ballet practice in class. A choreographer stressed, "We borrowed rhythmic patterns and gestures from local traditions to create a seamless fusion, ensuring that the performance felt authentically Chinese." This integration was aimed at anchoring the production within the cultural context without compromising technical rigor, showing commitment from the creative team toward authenticity in the cultural space.

### 4.2 Research Question

The table highlights the creative team's balance of Chinese cultural elements with ballet's technical rigor, likened to freehand painting capturing the revolutionary spirit. Modern techniques like dynamic lighting, multimedia projections, and flexible costumes blend tradition with innovation, ensuring cultural authenticity and contemporary appeal.

Keywords/Phrases	Sub-Themes	Themes
"Balancing realism and romanticism," "freehand art"	Harmonizing narrative and artistic expression	Authenticity in Cultural Fusion: Maintaining the balance between traditional Chinese elements and ballet's technical rigor.
"Modern stage techniques," "visual innovation"	Innovation in stagecraft and design	Artistic Modernization: Transforming ballet with modern techniques to connect with contemporary audiences.

## Theme 1: Authenticity in Cultural Fusion

The creative team expressed their pride in achieving what they called a "harmonious blend" of Chinese cultural elements and Western ballet techniques. The intention was not only to fuse two cultures but to create something that belonged to both. One interviewee further discussed, "We did lots of research on Chinese art and history so that every detail from the costume to the choreography was authentic to the cultural context." The team also referenced the freehand art as a metaphor to explain the fluidity of the ballet. "Just as freehand painting captures the scene's essence rather than the details, our choreography tried to capture the spirit of the revolutionary years," said one stage designer. These reflections highlight the efforts of the team in providing a culturally authentic production that balances tradition with innovation.

## Theme 2: Artistic Modernization

Interview data also showed that the team used modern stage techniques strategically to enhance the accessibility and visibility of the performance. The lighting designer noted, "We utilized dynamic lighting and multimedia projections to make it all seem immersed into the story itself and take the audience in into its emotional core." The costumes highlighted a mixture of the past with modern, stating, "We had designed costumes which maintained respect towards history, yet permitted flexibility which ballet demanded." These contemporary aspects, the participants noted were needed for a more resonant interaction with a present audience, where one of the choreographers pointed out that the contemporary techniques made aesthetics improved and allowed the telling of a story that can now reach their contemporary. It reflects what is supposed to be seen from this whole group true, living ballet that moves, develops, and keeps with its own life and progress.

## 5.0 Discussion

### 5.1 Revolutionary Themes and Cultural Authenticity

The ending summarizes the efforts of the creative team, who were bent on introducing revolutionary themes in *The Banner*, particularly the "red spirit" of the 1927 Guangzhou Uprising. This method, much like *The Red Detachment of Women*, explains how revolutionary realism can attract the interest of the audience because it inspires emotional attachment to the struggles in the past (China Story, 2019). Sharp angles represent struggle while fluid movement represents hope, showing the struggle between realism and romanticism (Ren, 2021). While *The Red Detachment of Women* is broadened into Sinicization by the inclusion of diverse cultural elements like Lingnan aesthetics, as aligned with Cheng's (2021) focus on local resonance with global appeal, the creative team had done its utmost research in history and culture for authenticity, avoiding superficial integration, as pointed out by Lopez-Littleton & Blessett, 2015. In the end, *The Banner* demonstrates the ability of Sinicized ballet to transform itself from historical authenticity into a cultural innovation.

### 5.2 Cultural Fusion and Authenticity

The creative team's commitment to balancing Chinese cultural elements with ballet's technical rigor gives credence to their attempts to achieve authenticity in cultural fusion. Using freehand art as a metaphor for choreography speaks to a sophisticated appreciation of Chinese aesthetics, just as Kraidy (2002) put forward in his Cultural Hybridity Theory. Harmonizing the narrative with artistic expression was how the team approached a crucial challenge for Sinicization: protecting the integrity of the original art form and that of the adapted cultural elements. The results also further emphasize the importance of research and cultural grounding in authentic integration, similar to criticisms of shallow adaptations such as Disney's *Mulan* (Yang & Yang, 2024). Embedding cultural elements with depth and intentionality, *The Banner* avoids pitfalls in misrepresentation to be sure that the portrayal of revolutionary history and Chinese aesthetics has a ring of credibility to it and is emotionally resonant.

### 5.3 Artistic Modernization and Audience Engagement

This illustrates that the creative team adheres to making *The Banner* relevant for the contemporary audience through modern techniques, such as dynamic lighting and multimedia projections. Similarly, Lai Times (2021) posits that innovation allows ballet to transform into a dynamic form of art and culture. The use of multimedia elements in developing engaging visual experiences mirrors the capacity of ballet to adapt and attract the interest of a varied public, an essential aspect of globalization in performing arts (Fabryka-Protska et al., 2024). Although *Raise the Red Lantern* did apply modern techniques, *The Banner* further extended the application by injecting these innovations into the framework of the story. Lighting design alone can heighten the emotional effects of the key scenes and create an association between traditional and modern sensibilities. There has been this duality of cultural integrity along with globalized appeal that has been discussed in the literature review, which is a must-be-managed tension (Pati et al., 2015). This innovative approach has a new benchmark for blending tradition with contemporary appeal in Sinicized ballet.

### 5.4 Broader Implications for Sinicized Ballet

Thus, the findings of this research indicate that *The Banner* now serves as a benchmark for Sinicized ballet in the art of merging elements of traditional China with techniques of classic ballet and innovations of modern dance. This production shows how Sinicization is a strategy of cultural preservation, innovation, and dialogue between artistic traditions local and global. It also underlines a possibility in which ballet could provide a ground for cultural diplomacy; that bridges historical and modern narratives into the minds of people by transcending cultural limitations. On the challenges of authenticity and reception, *The Banner* speaks to broader discourses on the issue of cultural hybridity and artistic adaptation. The Sinicization of ballet should be not something to add a flavor of motifs to the West but some coherent performance with an echo within the culture- redefining its possibilities.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

*The Banner* is a Sinicized version of the ballet due to the marriage of revolutionary themes with Chinese aesthetics and modern stage techniques. It became historically realistic and artistically innovative by emphasizing the "red spirit" of the 1927 Guangzhou Uprising while balancing realism with romance by incorporating Lingnan cultural elements. *The Banner* redefined ballet as a culturally resonant and internationally appealing art form. The study is limited by its reliance on qualitative data from a small sample of interviews, which may not fully capture the diverse perspectives within the production team. Besides, the findings are specific to *The Banner* and may not be generalizable to other Sinicized ballet productions or broader cultural fusion practices. Future research may include comparative analyses of Sinicized ballet productions like *The Red Detachment of Women*, to trace strategies of cultural integration that change over time. Audience reception studies in various cultural contexts can help understand how such adaptations work globally. This research may be extended to other genres of performing arts to highlight the significance of Sinicization in improving the dialogue between tradition and modernity, bringing about valuable frameworks for the preservation of culture and the innovation of art in a globalized world.

## Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) for its academic support and resources. I also appreciate the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for its support.

## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

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