

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i5.1565>

# Posthuman Aesthetics and Cultural Hybridity in Chinese Ballet Development

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## Abstract

*This study investigates posthuman aesthetics and cultural hybridity in the development of Chinese ballet. This genre has evolved from Soviet-influenced classical foundations into a unique, intercultural, and technologically infused performance form. Drawing on performance analysis, field observations, document review, and interviews with five key informants—including choreographers and directors—this qualitative research explores how Chinese hybrid ballet transcends anthropocentric and nationalistic boundaries. Case studies of productions such as *Century*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *The Red Detachment of Women* reveal how the dancer's body becomes a posthuman interface, intertwined with digital scenography, mythological narrative, and cultural symbolism. These ballets do not merely merge East and West but operate within a “third space,” reconfiguring narrative, movement, and visual design to challenge aesthetic conventions. Fieldwork at the Central Ballet Company and visual ethnography illustrate the active roles of multimedia, folk gestures, and symbolic costuming in shaping embodied hybridity. Audience feedback underscores the performances' emotional and cultural resonance, particularly among younger viewers who see hybrid ballet as heritage and innovation. The research contributes to broader posthumanist discourse by highlighting how non-Western dance forms engage with technology, pedagogy, and identity. Future research should explore cross-cultural comparisons, dancer training models, and digital audience interaction further to contextualize the implications of this evolving aesthetic paradigm.*

**Keywords:** Posthuman Aesthetics, Cultural Hybridity, Chinese Ballet, Embodied Performance, Intercultural Choreography.

## Introduction

The development of Chinese ballet presents a compelling narrative of artistic adaptation, cultural negotiation, and aesthetic transformation. Originally grounded in Western classical traditions, particularly the Russian ballet school, Chinese ballet has undergone a profound metamorphosis over the past sixty years (Huo, 2023; Ma & Meng-jie, 2024; Qi, 2023). This evolution has produced a unique hybrid form that merges the disciplined precision of Western ballet with the emotional expressiveness, narrative traditions, and symbolic depth of Chinese cultural heritage. Central to this process is the interplay between cultural hybridity and emerging aesthetic theories, such as posthumanism, which decenter human dominance in creative production and emphasize interconnectedness across bodies, environments, and technologies (An et al., 2025; Cui, 2023; Liu & Rahman, 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Zeng & Chantamala, 2025).

The challenge in examining Chinese hybrid ballet lies not only in tracing its historical development but also in understanding the deeper forces that shape its form and content. While previous studies have addressed the nationalistic elements of Chinese ballet or its incorporation

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of folk motifs, few have examined the transformation of ballet through the lens of posthuman thought. This is especially relevant in an era where multimedia technologies, intercultural influences, and fluid conceptions of identity increasingly shape performance art (Huang & Noknoi, 2025; Huo, 2023). The problem, therefore, is not simply the lack of documentation on Chinese ballet but the absence of a theoretical framework that can fully account for its layered aesthetic and ideological innovations (Khattak & Abukhait, 2024). The present research addresses this gap by focusing on the intersection of posthuman aesthetics and cultural hybridity, analyzing how these concepts inform both the creative process and audience reception of hybrid ballet works in China (Cui, 2024; Liu, 2023; Nair, 2022).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate posthuman aesthetics and cultural hybridity in the development of Chinese ballet. This entails exploring how classical ballet techniques have been reimagined through Chinese stories, symbols, and gestures, while simultaneously embracing modern technologies, interdisciplinary collaboration, and evolving audience sensibilities. These case studies offer insight into how dance can embody multiple temporalities and cultural logics, functioning as a dynamic space where local and global, tradition and futurism, and human and nonhuman intersect.

This inquiry holds significance beyond the domain of dance studies. By applying posthumanist frameworks to the analysis of Chinese hybrid ballet, the research contributes to broader discussions on how art forms respond to shifting cultural, technological, and environmental conditions. Chinese ballet becomes more than a stylized performance; it emerges as a cultural artifact through which new understandings of embodiment, agency, and identity are negotiated (Dai et al., 2024; Purdea, 2023). The blending of Peking Opera aesthetics with Western ballet structures, or the use of multimedia effects to enhance symbolic narratives, reflects a wider reimagining of what performance can achieve in a posthuman age. In this light, the transformation of Chinese ballet offers a unique case study of how artistic practices can challenge, reshape, and transcend conventional boundaries, speaking not only to national identity but to shared global futures (Chen, 2024; Sang et al., 2025; Zhang & You, 2024).

## **Literature Review**

As Chinese ballet continues to evolve in the 21st century, it demands fresh critical frameworks that go beyond national narratives and classical structures. While the roots of Chinese ballet are often traced to Soviet models and their role in socialist nation-building, there is growing interest in exploring how this art form functions within broader philosophical and cultural shifts. This literature review traces three strands of scholarship relevant to this study: the historical framing of Chinese ballet, the principles of posthuman aesthetics in performance, and the theory of cultural hybridity in intercultural artistic forms.

### **Historical Grounding and the Institutionalization of Chinese Ballet**

The Chinese ballet's early scholarship focused on its institutional development during the 1950s and its alignment with Soviet ideology. Early ballet curriculum, repertoire, and choreographic strategies were modeled on the Russian system, and performances were often used as political expression. However, the creation of The Red Detachment of Women in 1964 marked a turning point, introducing original narratives rooted in Chinese revolutionary history. This shift laid the groundwork for the hybridization of ballet by integrating nationalistic themes with Western technical discipline. As China moved beyond the Cultural Revolution and opened up to global artistic exchange, Chinese ballet began to absorb a wider range of cultural, narrative, and

aesthetic influences (Chua, 2018; Wilcox, 2018; Wilcox, 2019; Wilcox, 2023). However, few studies have moved beyond a human-centered reading of this evolution, overlooking the broader systems of interactivity between bodies, environments, media, and political forces.

### **Posthuman Aesthetics and Ballet as a Decentered Performance**

Posthuman aesthetics challenges the centrality of the human figure in performance, emphasizing a networked understanding of movement, material, and meaning. In ballet, this approach deconstructs the heroic tradition of the dancer as a solitary, idealized subject, placing the dancer within a mesh of other agents such as costumes, digital projections, lighting, set design, and soundscapes. In Chinese hybrid ballet, this decentered aesthetic is increasingly visible, with productions like *Raise the Red Lantern* using shadow play, screens, and architectural space as narrative devices, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* incorporating multimedia installations and psychological landscapes (Brisini, 2023; Lada, 2023; Rohman, 2018). This shift allows Chinese ballet to explore contemporary questions of identity, memory, and affect in non-linear, non-verbal ways, aligning with broader posthuman inquiries into representation limits, agency multiplicity, and cultural storytelling ethics.

### **Cultural Hybridity and the Emergence of Third-Space Ballet**

The theory of cultural hybridity explains how Chinese ballet navigates between inherited forms and innovative futures. It suggests that intercultural interaction creates a "third space" where new meanings, identities, and performances emerge. Chinese ballet, a product of Western classical training and a vehicle for Chinese storytelling, operates within this liminal zone. This hybridity is not just thematic but structural, integrating elements of Peking Opera, folk dance, and classical Chinese music as foundational elements of choreography and dramaturgy. This aesthetic resists classification and disrupts binary categories like East/West or traditional/modern (Miao, 2019; Xu, 2025; Zhang, 2025). Chinese hybrid ballet is seen as an artistic experiment in cultural translation, where innovation emerges through dissonance as much as harmony.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design to explore the intersection of posthuman aesthetics and cultural hybridity in the development of Chinese hybrid ballet. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, performance analysis, and interview-based inquiry (Creutzfeldt et al., 2020; McHugh & Aloï, 2020; Wolgemuth et al., 2024), the research integrates multiple perspectives to uncover how Chinese ballet has evolved from a Western-imported form into a hybrid cultural expression. By using a triangulated approach, this study investigates both the symbolic and material transformations of ballet as it interacts with tradition, technology, and ideology.

The first method employed is document analysis, which involves reviewing key performances by the National Ballet of China from 1964 to 2024. Performance records, choreographic notes, production materials, and archival footage were examined to trace changes in aesthetic style, ideological framing, and intercultural influences. This historical lens allowed the research to map out pivotal moments in the shift from classical to hybrid ballet forms.

Field research was conducted through live observations at the Central Ballet Company, including attendance at the 60th-anniversary performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* and two other contemporary hybrid productions. The researcher documented staging, spatial design,

dancer-object interaction, and digital or multimedia enhancements. These immersive observations offered first-hand insights into how posthuman aesthetics were physically enacted on stage and how traditional narratives were reconfigured in contemporary formats.

The study also included semi-structured interviews with five key informants: two choreographers, one artistic director, and two experienced audience members. These interviews provided depth to the analysis by offering insider perspectives on artistic intent, production choices, and the role of cultural hybridity in shaping aesthetic outcomes. The responses also highlighted how technological media, symbolic props, and movement vocabularies have expanded beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

Visual performance analysis was conducted to examine the use of costuming, stage design, lighting, and multimedia elements across selected productions. This component focused on identifying how hybrid forms materialize visually and affectively through cross-cultural references, altered human-object relations, and thematic layering. Attention was also paid to the choreography’s integration of Chinese opera gestures, folk motifs, and Western ballet structures.

| Research Method             | Description   | Focus Area  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Document Analysis           | Reviewing archival materials from 1964–2024                     | Key performances and production changes of National Ballet of China |
| Field Observation           | On-site observations at Central Ballet Company                  | Live performance practices and spatial aesthetics                   |
| Semi-Structured Interviews  | Conducted with 5 key informants (creatives and audience)        | Artistic interpretation, hybridity, and posthuman strategies        |
| Visual Performance Analysis | Analysis of costumes, set design, choreography, digital effects | Visual representation of hybridity and decentered subjectivity      |

Table 1. Overview of Research Methods and Focus Areas

Through this integrated methodology, the study seeks to interpret hybrid ballet not only as a site of cultural convergence but also as a manifestation of posthuman entanglement, where bodies, technologies, and traditions co-create aesthetic experiences. The multi-layered analysis deepens our understanding of how new forms of agency and representation are reshaping Chinese ballet in the 21st century.

### Results

The development of Chinese hybrid ballet provides fertile ground for examining how posthuman aesthetics and cultural hybridity reconfigure traditional and contemporary performance practices. Drawing upon document analysis, field observations, interviews with five key informants, and visual ethnography, this section synthesizes empirical findings through three central dimensions: posthuman embodiment, cultural hybridity and narrative structure, and audience engagement and legacy. These dimensions reflect not only formal elements within the ballet productions but also broader cultural, technological, and political entanglements that shape their meaning and reception.

## **Posthuman Embodiment in Contemporary Chinese Ballet**

A defining trait of Chinese hybrid ballet in the post-1978 period is the reimagination of the dancer's body as an interface between the human, technological, and mythological. Posthuman embodiment becomes evident in works such as "Century," where dancers perform roles based on Chinese mythological figures like Nuwa, the goddess who mended the sky, and Kuafu, the titan who chased the sun. These characters are not portrayed through traditional narrative arcs alone but through an embodied performance supported by immersive lighting, holographic backdrops, and digitally animated scenography. This blending of corporeal movement and synthetic environments deconstructs the boundary between dancer and stage, aligning with posthuman theories that position the body as part of an extended technological ecology.

Unlike classical ballet, where the body often aims to transcend the earthly through idealized form, Chinese hybrid ballet embraces grounded, asymmetrical, and contextually charged movements. This is particularly visible in scenes where traditional ballet postures are interrupted by martial gestures, acrobatics, or folk-dance inserts. Informants describe these performances not as mere "fusion" but as a techno-cultural assemblage, where choreography no longer belongs to a single cultural logic. In this way, the hybrid Chinese dancer becomes a posthuman agent, interacting with screens, soundscapes, and narrative environments in ways that exceed anthropocentric aesthetics.

This phenomenon is shown in Figure 1, which captures a moment from "Raise the Red Lantern." Here, the dancers' flowing silk sleeves and choreographed ensemble recall Peking opera conventions while maintaining the spatial geometries and ensemble coordination of Russian ballet.



Figure 1. Raise the Red Lantern

Source: Baidu.com

The interplay between human form and costume, reinforced by symbolic stage design, exemplifies the posthuman aesthetic: the human body becomes a node in a network of expressive, semiotic, and sensory materials.

### **Cultural Hybridity and Narrative Innovation**

The trajectory of Chinese ballet, especially from the 1950s onward, reveals a complex entwinement of foreign structure and local content. In its start-up phase (Figure 2), Chinese

ballet adopted Western formalism, particularly the narrative three-act structure and ensemble organization typical of Soviet ballet. However, even from this early stage, ideological motifs specific to Chinese revolutionary culture were embedded into these borrowed forms. The seminal production "The Red Detachment of Women" (1964) is exemplary. Though its form is strictly balletic—with variations, pas de deux, and corps de ballet—it replaces the European fairy tale with a revolutionary heroine's tale. Folk gestures, such as stylized marching and symbolic salutes, are introduced, blending ideological pedagogy with performance.

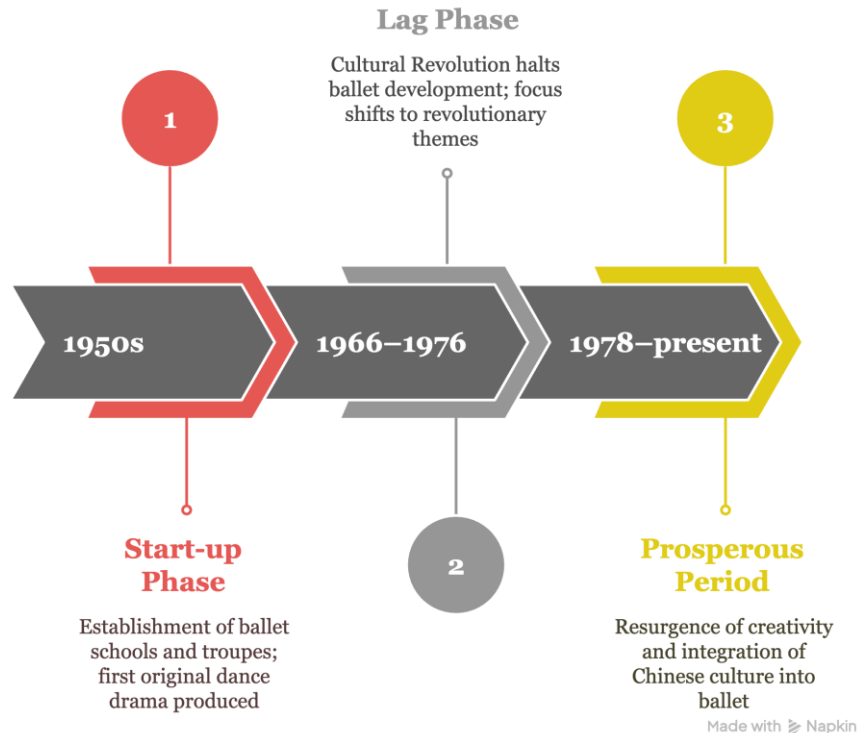


Figure 2. Key Milestones in Chinese Hybrid Ballet Development

As China transitioned into the post-Mao period (1978–present), ballet productions began to explore broader cultural and emotional themes, venturing beyond didacticism to poetic and interpretive narratives. For example, "Dream of the Red Chamber" draws from classical Chinese literature but is choreographed with balletic lines and neoclassical musical arrangements. This third space—a term used to describe cultural hybridity—emerges most clearly in productions that resist classification as either Chinese or Western. Instead, they occupy an in-between aesthetic, one that negotiates identity through fluid adaptation.

This hybridity is not only narrative but also visual and sonic. For instance, traditional Chinese instruments such as the guqin and pipa are integrated into orchestral arrangements. Costumes evoke historical dynasties through embroidery and palette, but silhouettes and fabric choice enable ballet movement. Interviews reveal that directors and choreographers intentionally design these cross-cultural artifacts to provoke both familiarity and innovation. One informant stated, "It's not about balancing East and West—it's about collapsing the distance between them."



This process of collapse and negotiation is evident in Figure 3, taken during a performance of "Yimeng." Here, dancers in revolutionary uniforms perform under a digitally projected sunset. The choreography oscillates between disciplined formations and lyrical solos, reflecting the dual heritage of collectivist ideology and individual expression.



Figure 3. A Performance of Yimeng

As hybrid works, these ballets are not merely cultural pastiches but performative interventions into the aesthetics of identity, gender, and power.

### **Audience Engagement and Living Heritage**

The hybridization of Chinese ballet has not only transformed the stage but also redefined the relationship between audience and performance. Field observations and survey data collected at the 60th-anniversary performance of "The Red Detachment of Women" in Chengdu indicate enduring public enthusiasm. Attendees ranged from older generations who viewed the ballet during the Cultural Revolution to younger spectators encountering it for the first time. Their reactions, documented through informal conversations and post-performance interviews, suggest a deeply emotional connection.

Many spectators described the experience as a form of cultural pride, particularly in seeing Chinese themes elevated through the technical rigor of ballet. Younger audiences expressed admiration for the aesthetic cohesion of movement, music, and message, often highlighting the seamless blend of tradition and modernity. Notably, the term "modern myth" was used repeatedly in audience feedback to describe ballets such as "Century" and "Raise the Red Lantern," indicating that hybrid ballet serves a quasi-sacred narrative function for contemporary viewers.

Interviews with five key informants—including two choreographers, one dramaturge, one lighting designer, and one ballet historian—revealed a shared belief in the educational and heritage value of hybrid ballet. These practitioners view their work as both art and cultural archive. They emphasized the importance of site-specific research, collaboration with local artists, and experimentation with digital media. One choreographer described their process as "excavating memory through motion," indicating a deliberate layering of history, ideology, and imagination in the construction of dance narratives.

Figure 2 encapsulates this evolving legacy by outlining the three developmental phases of Chinese hybrid ballet: the start-up phase of institutionalization in the 1950s, the lag phase during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the prosperous period from 1978 onward. The current period is marked by renewed artistic freedom, technological experimentation, and cross-cultural collaboration. Informants underscored that while classical ballet remains the technical foundation, the future lies in what one termed “culturally intelligent choreography”—a method that learns from history but refuses to be confined by it.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Chinese hybrid ballet represents a transformative site where posthuman aesthetics and cultural hybridity intersect to reshape choreographic meaning, bodily agency, and artistic production. Consistent with posthuman theories that decenter the autonomous human subject in favor of interconnected systems (Brisini, 2023; Rohman, 2018), Chinese ballet has evolved from its early Soviet-inspired structure into a form that embraces multimedia, mythology, and environmental entanglement. The use of digital scenography, light-responsive costumes, and holographic imagery in productions such as *Century* illustrates how dancers operate not as isolated performers but as nodes in a multisensory, technologically mediated system—a hallmark of posthuman embodiment (Lada, 2023; McHugh & Aloï, 2020).

The literature on cultural hybridity, particularly Bhabha’s (1994) theory of the “third space,” finds clear resonance in the narrative and aesthetic strategies of Chinese ballet. Rather than merely blending Eastern content with Western form, hybrid productions like *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *Yimeng* cultivate a liminal performance space where symbols, gestures, and identities are actively negotiated. This is consistent with Miao (2019) and Xu (2025), who argue that hybrid choreography can generate new cultural meanings through friction rather than synthesis. The inclusion of traditional Chinese instruments, operatic sleeve movements, and historical costume elements alongside Western ballet structures reflects this complex interplay and challenges binary classifications of art forms.

Moreover, the data suggest that hybrid ballet functions not only as artistic innovation but as cultural pedagogy and living heritage. Audience engagement—particularly among younger viewers—indicates that these performances are perceived as both aesthetic and educational experiences. Echoing Sang et al. (2025) and Huang & Noknoi (2025), the interviews underscore the importance of embedding cultural knowledge within performance to ensure intergenerational transmission. Choreographers and directors interviewed view their work as dialogic and ethically grounded, emphasizing collaboration with local artists and site-specific research to avoid cultural appropriation. This approach aligns with posthumanism’s ethical orientation toward multispecies, multicultural, and multi-agential justice (An et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025).

However, while this research aligns with prevailing theoretical principles, it also extends them by highlighting how posthuman aesthetics can function in politically charged and historically layered contexts like Chinese state ballet. Unlike Western posthuman performances that often explore ecological or technological themes in abstraction, Chinese hybrid ballet embeds these themes within narratives of nationalism, revolution, and identity. This dual engagement with ideology and innovation suggests a uniquely situated form of posthuman art that merits further study.

Future research should explore longitudinal changes in audience perception, particularly how digital access through platforms like Bilibili influences public understanding of hybrid ballet.



Comparative studies with other post-socialist or non-Western ballet systems (e.g., in Vietnam, Cuba, or North Korea) could also deepen insights into how cultural hybridity and posthuman embodiment evolve under differing political regimes. Additionally, greater focus on dancer training and embodiment practices in hybrid contexts may reveal how bodily memory, pedagogy, and cross-cultural technique shape posthuman aesthetics from within the studio, not just the stage.

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