

## The Adaptation and Cultural Transformation of *Yuanshengtai* in the Staged Performance of Tibetan Reba Dance

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### Abstract

This study examines the underexplored processes of constructing and negotiating *Yuanshengtai* in staged performances of Tibetan Reba Dance, addressing the tension between authenticity ideals and modern adaptations. Employing ethnographic methods, this research critically analyses how *Yuanshengtai* is collaboratively shaped by diverse actors within the context of Chinese intangible cultural heritage preservation. Findings indicate that *Yuanshengtai* in staged performances emerges through dynamic negotiations involving government agencies, choreographers, cultural elites, and folk artists. The concept serves to articulate cultural meanings related to national identity, cultural branding, and emotional nostalgia, despite sometimes detaching performances from their original social contexts. This study is dedicated to offering policymakers and cultural participants strategies to effectively balance authenticity with contemporary staging requirements.

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Reba Dance, staged performances, *Yuanshengtai*

### Introduction

In the 21st century, China's protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has significantly transformed the practices of folk art, including Tibetan Reba dance, shifting them from their embedded community contexts to state-sponsored staged performances (Zhang, 2019, p. 146). Central to this transformation is the aesthetic concept of *Yuanshengtai*, developed by Chinese scholars to emphasise cultural authenticity. While originally aimed at safeguarding traditional expressions, its application in staged settings has sparked debates on cultural transformation and representational integrity. *Yuanshengtai*, rooted in UNESCO's notion of "authenticity," has been adopted and localised within China's heritage discourse as a core criterion for ICH assessment and performance (Su, 2018, p. 919). Chinese policymakers and cultural elites have used the concept to curate performances that preserve the visual, sonic, and symbolic markers of traditional culture (Chen, 2010; Zhang, 2006). However, this institutionalisation often leads to selective representations that detach performances from their original social and ritual functions (Mu, 2008; Liu, 2004). In many cases, *Yuanshengtai* becomes an aesthetic ideal rather than a lived practice, serving touristic, political, and branding purposes (Lee, 2020; Kendall, 2017). As a dominant aesthetic in Chinese folk-dance performance, *Yuanshengtai* strongly resonates with urban audiences' romanticised imaginations of ethnic minorities. It evokes nostalgia for a "pure," unspoiled cultural world, reinforcing essentialised images of remoteness, simplicity, and timelessness (Berry,

2015; D'Evelyn, 2018; Helen, 2012). Closely linked to ecological purity and cultural authenticity, the term aligns with broader agendas of cultural tourism, regional branding, and nation-building (Luo, 2018; Liu, 2004). While *Yuanshengtai* has become an aesthetic and political ideal, it often obscures the complexity and agency involved in representing tradition.

Despite its widespread invocation, the processes through which *Yuanshengtai* is constructed and negotiated in performance remain underexamined particularly in staged folk dances like Reba. Dance scholarship has predominantly focused on *Yuanshengtai*'s formal and environmental elements—its origins, structure, and transmission (Wilcox, 2018; Zi & Wang, 2012) yet has largely overlooked how choreographers, performers, and institutions collectively shape and re-configure it. Although some studies address its role in policy discourse and heritage frameworks (Zhu, 2015; Xu, 2011), its performative politics and embodied realisation on stage remain insufficiently explored.

This research gap is particularly significant in China, where traditional folk cultures are often documented and staged by state-sponsored experts under the rubric of "authenticity," occasionally diverging from lived community practices (Silverman & Blumenfield, 2013). The paradox of *Yuanshengtai* is that once a folk practice like Reba is reclassified and presented as "authentic" on stage, it loses the very context in which it originally thrived (Mu, 2008; Liu, 2004). While intended to preserve cultural heritage, such efforts often lead to a reification of tradition, privileging visual spectacle over experiential meaning.

China's preservation strategy has actively promoted *Yuanshengtai* to populate UNESCO inventories and assert the legitimacy of cultural expressions performed in local dialects and un-modernised styles (Lee, 2020). This framework idealises *Yuanshengtai* as a static marker of cultural authenticity (Kendall, 2017), but its staged application—shaped by elite aesthetics and state funding—often serves touristic and economic agendas rather than community-based transmission (Lee, 2020, p. 67).

As Hobsbawm (1983) mentioned, "traditions that appear or claim to be ancient are often relatively recent in origin and sometimes intentionally invented." Similarly, Fenske and Bendix (2007) view heritage as "a process of engagement, an act of communication, and a means of making meaning for the present." From this perspective, staged Reba dance is not a static preservation of culture but a site of active negotiation where cultural meaning, political intention, and artistic identity intersect. This study seeks to examine that very intersection.

This study examines how the concept of *Yuanshengtai* is constructed and negotiated among different actors including government institutions, choreographers, cultural elites, and folk artists within staged Tibetan Reba dance performances. It investigates how authenticity is redefined and embodied in contemporary cultural production and how staged forms may both pre-serve and reshape tradition. The article begins by contextualising *Yuanshengtai* within China's ICH discourse, then explores its negotiation in staged Reba dance practices, and concludes by discussing implications for cultural policy and folk arts sustainability. My English grammar is great. My English grammar is great. My English grammar is great. My English grammar is great. My English grammar is great. My English grammar is great.

Since the early 21st century, *Yuanshengtai* has emerged as a critical concept in China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection, particularly in the staged performances of Tibetan Reba dance. Developed by Chinese scholars, it emphasises the preservation and presentation of original forms of folk performing arts and has become central to heritage discourse. However, its application has revealed inherent tensions. While seeking to reflect folk traditions' origins, staged performances often detach *Yuanshengtai* from its lived cultural and social contexts. This detachment risks oversimplifying, commodifying, and aestheticizing traditional practices, raising concerns about the loss of their original meaning and function. Moreover, *Yuanshengtai* is not a fixed standard but a negotiated concept shaped by multiple actors—government bodies, cultural elites, and performers—each interpreting and applying it according to distinct goals and agendas. These interactions create a dynamic process of construction and performance. Addressing this complexity, the present study critically examines how *Yuanshengtai* is constructed and applied in staged Reba dance and how it influences the inheritance and transformation of traditional dance practices under the ICH framework. At the same time, this research addresses real problems faced in cultural heritage work. It is committed to offering practical suggestions for policymakers, choreographers, and cultural workers. These suggestions focus on how to maintain cultural authenticity while also meeting the demands of modern stage presentation.

## Methodology

To examine the construction and impact of *Yuanshengtai* on the performance and inheritance of Reba dance, this study adopts ethnographic methods, including textual analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. Since August 2017, the authors have conducted several dozen in-depth interviews and engaged in 12 intensive field visits to Tibet.

During these visits, we directly participated in rehearsals, classroom teaching, and performances. We also engaged in everyday local life. To build trust and better integrate into the community, I adopted a Tibetan name and learned basic Tibetan phrases. These efforts helped me to navigate both outsider (etic) and insider (emic) perspectives in the field. Throughout the research, ethical considerations were strictly observed. These included in-formed consent, respect for cultural norms, and the protection of participants' privacy.

This research investigates how the concept of *Yuanshengtai* is proposed, interpreted, and realised by different actors involved in the safeguarding of Reba dance. It explores the diverse understandings of *Yuanshengtai*, its construction and presentation in staged performances, and how this shaping process affects the inheritance and development of Reba dance. Special attention is given to the cultural reproduction and transformation of artistic experience that occurs during the institutionalisation of folk performance.

## Results

### The *Yuanshengtai* Concept in the Context of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

*Yuanshengtai* emerged in early 21st-century China as an academic concept closely tied to the rise of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection efforts. It has been considered a critical concept for preserving traditional folk culture and as a measure for evaluating stage performance works (Han, 2015, p. 86). It originates from UNESCO's concept of "authenticity" and has evolved under China's official ICH discourse, particularly the so-called "authorised heritage dis-course" (Su, 2021, p. 30). Notably, although UNESCO considers the concept of authenticity problematic for ICH and international heritage systems, during the localisation of UNESCO's ICH discourse in China, the concept of authenticity has gradually been emphasised in the form of *Yuanshengtai* in Chinese official ICH discourse (Su, "A Difficult Integration", p. 35). This highlights the differing interpretations and adaptations of the authenticity concept between UNESCO and local contexts, reflecting China's unique approach to cultural heritage preservation.

### The Emergence and Development of *Yuanshengtai*

*Yuanshengtai*, derived from ecology, refers to a culture that embodies an untainted, rustic tradition rooted in the communal practices of specific ethnic groups. In the context of China's intangible cultural heritage protection, it has become a crucial concept intertwined with authenticity, utilised by the government and intellectuals to reinforce cultural identity and preservation (Chen, 2014, p. 17).

The academic community regards *Yuanshengtai* as an ideal evaluative criterion for preserving traditional folk culture. It focuses on maintaining the original status, form, and type of conventional cultural practices during transmission. Over time, *Yuanshengtai* has evolved into a symbol of efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the importance of preserving cultural authenticity (Han, 2015, p. 86).

As shown in Figure 1, the concept of *Yuanshengtai* has evolved under the combined forces of cultural preservation needs and pressures from globalisation. As globalisation accelerated, concerns over the erosion of national identity became more pronounced, prompting Chinese scholars and policymakers to develop a framework that intertwines preserving traditional culture with the concept of authenticity. This approach reflects the strategic collaboration between the Chinese government and intellectuals, who have utilised *Yuanshengtai* to address domestic and international cultural challenges.

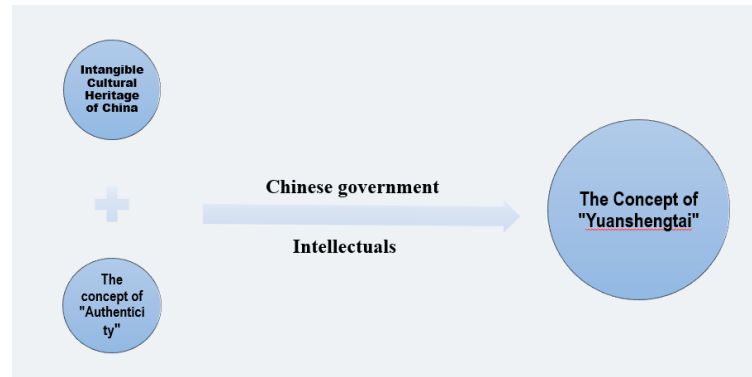


Figure 1. The Emergence and Development of the *Yuanshengtai* Concept (Source: Authors)

Chinese audiences often associate *Yuanshengtai* with minority cultures. It signifies a backwards and natural lifestyle absent in modern urban settings. A *Yuanshengtai* culture is regarded as an authentic embodiment of vibrant culture rooted in the traditional collective activities of specific ethnic minority groups in areas away from urban civilisation. Therefore

In ethnic folk performances, *Yuanshengtai* is developed as symbolic, even artistic, representing an untrained or immature state and practices closer to the origin of art (Han, 2015, p. 89).

In China's intangible cultural heritage framework, *Yuanshengtai* better describes the native ethnic and traditional culture and mobilises it for local socio-economic development, China's domestic agenda, and international aspirations (Luo, 2018, p. 173). In contrast, authenticity bolsters the "authorised heritage discourse," a hegemonic discourse operated by international professional organisations such as UNESCO. This often results in neglecting or marginalising unofficial or alternative heritage discourses held by local cultural custodians and community members.

### Evolution of *Yuanshengtai* in Staged Performances

*Yuanshengtai* refers to traditional ethnic minority culture, often idealised as being un-touched by modern life and rooted in local customs. The term gained popularity partly due to the trend of ethnic minority traditional singing and dancing performances in the media and Tourism, Culture and Arts Festivals. This trend popularised *Yuanshengtai* and led to its incorporation into stage performances, where it became a widely demanded aesthetic feature. This demand largely stems from the folklore mindset of external individuals seeking to explore and assess the authenticity of other cultures.

The ethos of *Yuanshengtai* seeks to convey a perceived authenticity in traditional and local cultural traits unaffected by modern cultures (J. Chen, 2008, p. 159). The appeal of *Yuanshengtai* emanates from anxieties over the perceived decline of traditional influences on contemporary life, rapid social change, and environmental degradation (Li et al., 2019, p.158).

Similar to early anthropological views that constructed "primitive others" as subjects of fascination and symbolic challenge to Western modernity, the Chinese state and intellectual discourses have portrayed ethnic minority cultures through a lens of exoticism and temporal distance (L. Liu, 2018, p. 105). Drawing on the notion of the cultural "other," they developed a symbolic system using *Yuanshengtai* to represent minority traditions as pure, original, and untainted. This framework responded to the perceived absence of tradition among urban populations and addressed the growing desire for authentic cultural experiences (Gladney, 1994, p. 94; Luo, 2018, p. 175). In doing so, *Yuanshengtai* became a strategic narrative tool for reconstructing cultural identity and managing national heritage in modern China.

The allure of *Yuanshengtai* performances lies in providing opportunities for accessing, observing, and appreciating tradition, addressing concerns about modernity, and offering a chance to lament and reflect on the negative impacts of development and modernisation. Staged performances, utilising the lived body of performers as a medium of presentation and expression, offer a more intuitive narrative style than textual forms (Helen 2012, 89). Recognising this, government authorities and state-funded intellectuals have incorporated staged performances to preserve and manage intangible cultural heritage. As the system for safeguarding

intangible cultural heritage matured, *Yuanshengtai* was widely applied to staged folk art performances. These performances emphasise remoteness in time, ancientness in space, and simplicity in presentation. They serve as a cultural anchor in a shifting social landscape, symbolising the inevitability of specific ethnic groups and their corresponding traditional cultures (Ai, 2019).

*Yuanshengtai* performances often attract individuals from mainstream culture who seek out diverse experiences and valuable resources. They can sometimes help divert a modern individual's attention from everyday life to the faraway exotic others, to escape it all. However, while fulfilling contemporary individuals' inner desires and projections, these performances also raise concerns about cultural authenticity and changes in cultural meaning in performances.

### **The Aesthetic Concept of *Yuanshengtai* in Folk Dance Performances**

As *Yuanshengtai* became associated with cultural originality and authenticity, the Chinese Ministry of Culture adopted it to guide national initiatives for folk culture preservation. One of the primary means was performance. In the early 21st century, *Yuanshengtai* began to be integrated with staged performances and subsequently was widely applied in the staged presentations of traditional folk arts. Stage productions such as "Yunnan Reflections (Yunnan Yingxiang)," touted as "the nation's first large-scale original ecological song and dance collection," were introduced, and "*Yuanshengtai* form of singing (*yuanshengtai changfa*)" segments were added to national singing competitions (Xu, 2011, p. 15).

As this concept became widely used, various academic domains began to utilise it to explore the relationship between traditional folk-art performances and their natural and social environments and the localised knowledge explored from an outsider's perspective. Romanticised views of folk as primitive and static often resulted in the substitution of the term "folk" with *Yuanshengtai*, giving folk art a more aestheticized and essentialised appearance (Wan, 2016). Chen (2014) highlighted that "borderlands are fundamental sites in the diverse scalar reconfiguration of the social-spatial imaginary," suggesting that the dynamic reconfiguration of cultural identities often occurs in these marginal areas where traditional and modern influences intersect. This highlights the complex interactions between local traditions and external perceptions, influencing the *Yuanshengtai* presentation of folk art.

In staged dance performances, *Yuanshengtai* often refers to a dynamic bodily language presented by a primitive other removed from modernity, closely related to the conventional folk culture rooted in everyday life and the presentation of costumes, props, movement, and music. Its purpose is to maximise the presentation through dance forms of the ecological form and cultural connotations preserved in the local area. Ethnic minorities are often constructed as others with primitive, differentiated traditions and fixed identities. As a result, dance performances related to *Yuanshengtai* are usually combined with folk dances by ethnic minorities. The difference between staged *Yuanshengtai* folk dance performances and folk dances is significant. Staged *Yuanshengtai* folk dance performances attempt to use original forms and types of song and dance to showcase ethnic culture, employing modern stage means and representing meticulous ethnic stage art creation. Folk dances are part of the cultural composition combined with the folk culture of the ethnic group or region, existing in the people's lives, with dance as the presentation method, reflecting the overall spirit and cultural appearance of the ethnic group.

*Yuanshengtai*, in dance performances, responds to the authenticity demands of modern urbanites experiencing drastic changes. *Yuanshengtai* dance performances serve as a spiritual source, supporting an essential way modern individuals escape, recharge, and rediscover, providing a continuous creative space for choreographers and performers. Moreover, they have gradually become an effective means for local regions to explore and present their traditional culture, obtaining social benefits, economic benefits, and academic attention, thereby influencing the trend of protecting and inheriting ethnic dances.

### **Construction and Presentation of *Yuanshengtai* in Reba Dance Stage Performances**

Within the ICH protection framework, choreographers and dancers aim to stage Reba dance as if it remains untouched by modern influences, highlighting its imagined folk origins. Despite being a creation work staged

on the theatre platform, Reba dance has departed from its original setting, Tibetan folk traditions, and daily life practices, losing its original functionality as a means of livelihood and self-entertainment.

*Yuanshengtai* is not inherited directly but is staged through selective choreography and aesthetic decisions. Choreographers and dancers attempt to show the existence of Reba dance in its original folk state by employing specific movements, postures, formations, and stage designs and by evoking the emotions and perceptions of the audience, aiming to evoke memories of a folk culture untouched by commercialisation and modernisation.

### **The Evolution of Reba Dance Performances in the Context of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

As a traditional Tibetan folk art, Reba is characterised by its comprehensiveness, performance elements, and ritual nature, deeply intertwined with the original Tibetan belief system, known as the Bon religion (Wang 2011, 3). As society evolved, the religious aspects of Reba gradually diminished, transforming it into one of Tibet's most prominent folk arts. Reba dance, which primarily focuses on the bell drum dance, is a central component of Reba. Tracing its origins to the Witch Dance, Totem Dance, and *Qiangm* performed during Bon religious rituals, Reba dance later became a means for wandering performers to make a living, primarily within the folk community.

In the 1980s, China launched the national project The Integrated Chronicles of Chinese National and Folk Literature and Art (Gao, Ha, & Thiagarajan, 2024), which systematically documented folk arts, including Reba dance. This effort marked the beginning of Reba dance's transformation from a local folk practice into a national cultural symbol, reflecting the state's increasing interest in leveraging traditional culture to advance broader socio-political objectives (Zhou, 2009, p. 51; Zeji, 2008, p. 12).

With the ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004, Reba dance (Dingqing Reba) was officially recognised as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006. This recognition brought Reba dance into the educational and artistic domains, integrating it into state-sponsored cultural events and competitions, such as the 2018 Tibet Autonomous Region Reba Dance Performance in *Qamdo* and the 13th China Dance "Lotus Cup" Dance Competition in 2021 (Gao, 2019, p. 51). The transformation of Reba dance into a staged performance for cultural and educational purposes raises critical questions about preserving its original cultural significance. While these developments reflect the state's commitment to cultural preservation, they also underscore the tensions between maintaining Reba dance's traditional roles and adapting it to contemporary contexts. This shift prompts a re-evaluation of the dance's current function and place within the broader narrative of China's intangible cultural heritage protection.

### **Construction of *Yuanshengtai* in Reba Dance Stage Performances**

The stage is a determining factor in shaping the authenticity of folk performances, which indicates their adaptability to modernity (Bhagabati, 2021, p. 115). In the context of staged performances of folk dances, *Yuanshengtai* is not presented objectively. Instead, it reflects ethnic identity and culture from the perspective of mainstream culture and is recognised by society and the state. *Yuanshengtai* is not defined by strict and consensus-based references but is an ongoing construction process. In this process, the *Yuanshengtai* of staged Reba dance is shaped through negotiation among actors, reflected in postures, movements, costumes, and props. However, the performance's performative and cultural temporalities contradict the concept of *Yuanshengtai* (K. L. Liu, 2004). The aesthetic ideal of *Yuanshengtai* in Reba dance is co-constructed by intellectuals, local governments, audiences, and folk performers (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Diverse Actors Involved in Constructing *Yuanshengtai* Reba Dance Performances  
(Source: Authors)

First, intellectuals extensively participated in formulating Reba dance choreography and performance standards. They typically engage in roles such as choreographers and professional judges. They also strategically select, design, and arrange elements to make Reba dance performances appear as dances conducted in traditional ways, unaffected by modern technological interference or artificial embellishment.

The choreographer of the group dance *Xianyin* Drum Dance stated, "To highlight the traditional features of Reba, I have visited Tibetan areas six times for practical fieldwork, in-depth research, and learning of Reba dance techniques. The bell and drum dance, mainly circulated in regions such as *Qamdo* in Tibet, is the most representative part of Reba, with typical performances involving women playing the Reba drum while men perform with bells. My work is based on the traditional form of this dance" (Yuanyuan, personal communication, August 23, 2018, in Qamdo, Tibet).

According to the authors' investigations detailing this dance work, Xuanyin Drum Dance reconstructs Reba by incorporating Reba drum dances with different regional characteristics and rhythmic features. Such dance works are no longer Reba dances in the traditional sense. Choreographers construct the aesthetic propositions of *Yuanshengtai* through the selection of dance rhythms and movement and the incorporation of personal emotions and fieldwork experiences.

Secondly, Tibetan local governments are involved. They seek to integrate the development of ethnic culture with regional economic development goals. A necessary means to do that is folk dance performances. They construct presentations that meet the expectations of audiences and academia regarding *Yuanshengtai* by collaborating with intellectuals, fully utilising local resources, and extensively mobilising public participation. In August 2018, the first Tibet Autonomous Region Reba Dance Performance was held in *Qamdo*, Tibet, gathering folk groups, intellectuals, and media professionals (Gao, 2018). The performance was divided into folk dance performances and professional group competitions, with the former particularly emphasising *Yuanshengtai*. According to the author's fieldwork, local governments, during the promotional phase, highlighted *Qamdo* as the birthplace of Reba dance, emphasised the performers' authenticity, and underscored the close connection between the performers and their homeland to demonstrate the authenticity of the performances.

The folk-dance section focused on groups from various cities and provinces, including other major Tibetan regions in China, such as Yunnan, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Gansu. Many of these performers were descendants of Reba families or former itinerant artists without professional dance training. Their participation is seen as directly bringing the native Reba dance performance groups, consisting of non-professional folk artists, to the performance stage. Extensively mobilising public involvement has been understood as a means to convey their originality and authenticity, as these performers are closely connected to the traditional roots and practices of the dance. Moreover, the organisers claimed that the performances were held outdoors, in natural surroundings, allowing the folk artists to perform Reba dance in an environment that retained the local characteristics of their origins. This setting was intended to showcase the genuine emotions of the Reba artists and the authenticity of Reba dance (Xiazhu, personal communication, Aug 22, 2018, in Qamdo, Tibet). The promotional narrative, the appropriation of folk power, and the utilisation of local resources collectively transformed these performances into cultural attractions with regional and distinctive characteristics. As an

extension of *Yuanshengtai*, these cultural attractions satisfied the audience's imagination and demand for "other" cultures (Liu, 2018).

As another group influencing the construction of *Yuanshengtai*, audiences harbour a certain degree of imagination toward traditional ethnic folk culture. For them, Reba dance is associated with racialised, pre-modern, and timeless bodies that must maintain their primitiveness to remain attractive (Bhagabati, 2021). They attempt to confirm the symbolic representation of *Yuanshengtai* in the performance while also obscuring the social reality of their lack of understanding of traditional culture. This leads to a symbolic presentation of *Yuanshengtai* in Reba dance performances, reinforcing stereotypes about the dance.

For folk groups, the intentional emphasis on *Yuanshengtai* does not truly originate from their cultural needs but rather from a need to obtain resources. Folk artists participate in government-organised Reba dance performances to receive performance fees and subsidies. This also serves as one of the ways to enhance their social status. As a result, most are willing to participate in this organised strategy, regardless of whether these performances are officially recognised as *Yuanshengtai* (Personal communication, August 22, 2018, in Tibet). In summary, the authors argue that *Yuanshengtai* is not initially present but is constructed through the collective participation and negotiation of intellectuals, Tibetan local governments, audiences, and folk groups. In this process, factors such as the romantic imagination of *Yuanshengtai* from the mainstream cultural perspective, the selective expression of local cultural resources by intellectuals and government agencies, the strategic experience of national intangible cultural heritage protection, individual emotional experiences of audiences, and the demands of folk groups all play an important role.

### Presentation of *Yuanshengtai* in Reba Dance Stage Performances

*Yuanshengtai*, as presented on stage, derives from aesthetic negotiation among multiple actors rather than direct cultural transmission. This set of aesthetic propositions involves the selective use and creative reimagining of symbols associated with *Yuanshengtai* by choreographers and dancers. It aims to present Reba dance with an appearance of untouched, unadulterated originality, free from the interference of modern technology. According to the authors' investigation, the first Tibet Autonomous Region Reba Dance Performance demonstrated *Yuanshengtai* through traditional props, drumbeats, costumes, music, and choreography. Table 1 summarises the strategies employed in various Reba dance works to convey *Yuanshengtai*

Table 1. The diverse presentation strategies employed in different Reba dance works to showcase the *Yuanshengtai*

Content	Style	Title	Performing Group
《丁嘎热巴》	Traditional Reba dance style incorporating family-crafted Reba drums and daggers	Named after the Reba dance style	Folk ensembles
《热巴嘟噜》	Narrative centered on the life of Reba artists; blends music and performing arts	Named after the Reba dance style	Folk ensembles
《容中尔甲热巴》	Traditional Reba dance style featuring female drumming and male ground movements	Named after the Reba dance style	Folk ensembles
《绿茵热巴》	Chronicles the historical development of Reba dance; includes traditional Tibetan folk singing	Named after the Reba dance style	Folk ensembles
《噶卡热巴甫巴》	Explores the origins of Reba dance; highlights the founder and presents a collage of imagery	—	Folk ensembles
《经典传承·根艺云艺》	Focused presentation of regional folk arts; emphasizes collage and visual integration	—	Folk ensembles
《汉格岗高原情》	Collage of Dingqing Reba and Mangkang Xianzi; highlights Eastern Tibetan folk dance traditions	Emphasizes emotional ties to the plateau	Members of the Qamdo Kangba Cultural Art Troupe



In the male group dance *Dingga* Reba, performed by the folk Reba team from Biru County in northern Tibet, dancers use traditional handmade square cowhide drums and wear “*tacha*” net-like skirt tassels symbolising their identity as Reba male artists. Qiong Reba highlights the story of Reba artists learning and performing through traditional mask dancing, emphasising *Yuanshengtai*.

*Wotuo* Reba showcases female dancers’ drumming skills and recreates male performers’ ground movement techniques. Tangka, Mila Reba draws inspiration from the image of Milarepa in tangka paintings, portraying the origins of Reba dance and its ritualistic aspects, thereby emphasising *Yuanshengtai*.

Before the *Chawa* Reba performance from *Zuogong* County, dancers formed a circle, holding drums, bells, and other props. They lightly beat the drums and chanted in Tibetan. Even though the audience might not understand the language, preserving traditional elements satisfied their romantic imagination of *Yuanshengtai*. *Yuanshengtai* is also reflected in the naming of Reba dance works, such as *Wotuo* Reba and *Dongluo* Reba, which are named after the dance style or family. This practice aims to bring folk culture onto the stage directly. Tangka, Mila Reba blends different cultural elements with *Xianzi* Reba. *Kangba* Sound combines Reba dance and *Xianzi* singing to present Tibetan ethnic folk culture, highlighting *Yuanshengtai*.

Tangka Mila Reba blends the imagery of Milarepa, the legendary founder of Reba dance, and tangka, a traditional Tibetan painting art, to fuse different cultural elements of Tibetan ethnic groups, shaping the concept of *Yuanshengtai*. A similar approach is used in *Xianzi* Reba. *Kangba* Sound combines Reba dance and *Xianzi* singing with folk music from the *Kangba* region. This work creates a microcosm of Tibetan ethnic folk culture on stage, highlighting *Yuanshengtai* through representative and regional folk performance forms.

Stage design, movement structure, and emotional tone all contribute to shaping how *Yuanshengtai* is perceived by the audience. For example, *Huantengde* Gaoyuan, a group dance featuring Dingqing Reba and *Mangkang Xianzi* elements, was performed by 46 dancers from *The Kangba Cultural Arts Troupe of Qamdo City*. This piece, which participated in the 13<sup>th</sup> China Dance “Lotus Cup” Dance Competition in 2021, focuses on blending Reba dance and *Xianzi* singing and dancing without explicitly emphasising *Yuanshengtai* (Z. Gao, personal communication, October 29, 2021, in Jinan, Shandong). The audience resonates with the performance’s sincere, straightforward, and candid emotional expression. These emotional expressions are integral to the extended meaning of *Yuanshengtai* in dance. For the dancers and choreographers, capturing this emotional and spiritual essence is key to connecting the performance to its cultural roots rather than solely preserving traditional forms.

In this section, it is important to emphasise how the fusion of different elements in the dance works contributes to the portrayal of *Yuanshengtai* and highlights the interconnectedness of traditional and contemporary influences. Additionally, the imagery of cultural authenticity and emotional needs influences the depiction of *Yuanshengtai* in Reba dance.

## Discussion

### The Impact of *Yuanshengtai* Performances on the Reba Dance Inheritance

As Feinberg (2018, p. 24) argues, folklore risks losing its authenticity when staged for public audiences. However, performances can become a space where tradition is not simply lost but reinterpreted and strategically reconstructed as *Yuanshengtai*. The authors argue that practitioners reinterpret Reba dance in its original form in this performative space, allowing society to perceive it anew. As the authors contend, this approach reproduces Reba dance and endows it with new social significance.

Fieldwork revealed that *Yuanshengtai* performances involve multiple actors whose roles and interactions reshape the cultural meaning and transmission of Reba dance. Through these performances, the authors observe practitioners reshape their understanding and artistic experiences of Reba dance, directly influencing its preservation and developmental trajectory.

The Chinese government promotes *Yuanshengtai* as a tool for showcasing national cultural diversity and enhancing symbolic unity across ethnic regions. For local governments, *Yuanshengtai* performances are not just cultural displays but strategic tools to promote ethnic diversity and local characteristics and stimulate economic growth. They encourage local elites, intellectuals, and folk communities (including folk artists) to participate actively in their respective commercial and social activities, collaborate closely with markets and

universities, and widely show-case local culture. The local government aims to enhance its cultural identity, cultural market, and reputation as a regional cultural leader by promoting the *Yuanshengtai* of its intangible cultural heritage, thereby contrasting with efforts to fossilise ethnic traditional culture.

Additionally, the involvement of various practitioners, including choreographers, dancers, and local artists, in *Yuanshengtai* performances leads to diverse interpretations and presentations of Reba dance. This practice strives to preserve traditional elements while allowing creative adaptations that keep the dance relevant and engaging for contemporary audiences. By engaging with *Yuanshengtai*, these practitioners contribute to the continuous evolution of Reba dance, ensuring its transmission to future generations while maintaining its cultural essence. Through the collaborative efforts of the government, intellectuals, and folk communities, *Yuanshengtai* performances play a crucial role in interpreting and sustaining the meaning of Reba dance in contemporary times.

### Variations in Interpreting *Yuanshengtai* within Reba Dance Performances

Ethnic minority groups shape the meaning of *Yuanshengtai* culture through their knowledge and personal experiences, leading to diverse interpretations influenced by individual and cultural perspectives. *Zeji*, also known as the “Reba Queen,” has been instrumental in refashioning Reba dance since the turn of the twenty-first century. She contends that folk art will inevitably change within the evolving socioeconomic context, making practitioners need to adapt their cultural practices to a changing society (Zeji, 2009). For practitioners like *Zeji*, *Yuanshengtai* means preserving stylistic elements of older artists while adapting to modern technologies and market demands. Reba dance performances derived from those elements continue to embody the essence of *Yuanshengtai* Reba dance rooted in the creativity of these artists. Regardless, these performances may be imbued with attributes beyond their original function, such as commercialisation or generating social or economic benefits unrelated to livelihood. Here, *Yuanshengtai* performances represent a cultural practice tied to local ethnic identities, constituting a dynamic and open process.

*Yuanshengtai* has gradually become familiar to audiences through performances and competitions labelled *Yuanshengtai*. For audiences, *Yuanshengtai* is less a definable standard and more an emotional experience shaped by expectations of “primitiveness” and “purity”. Their understanding of *Yuanshengtai* is characterised by a lesser influence from modern civilisation or preservation of more primitive customs or folkways, embodying an emotional pursuit of a return to a natural or primitive way of life. The characters in *Yuanshengtai* performances are perceived as representatives of primitive, differentiated traditions and fixed identities. The content of the performance reproduces an unchanged cultural state frozen at a specific moment in the history of the ethnic group or community. The authors argue that this idealisation, facilitated by intellectuals and local elites, reinforces *Yuanshengtai*’s perception while potentially legitimising cultural consumption and the exploitation of culturally distinct groups.

As the creators, bearers, and inheritors of Reba dance, the folk groups possess a complete experience of observing and perceiving the culture they carry. However, *Yuanshengtai* in Reba dance performances are relatively recent and unfamiliar to them. According to the author’s fieldwork, they rarely use the term *Yuanshengtai*. In their view, authenticity lies in everyday practice. The term *Yuanshengtai* is rarely used, as they see their performances as inherently real (Zhaxi-Dajie, Axia-Yonghong, & Luosong-Qiupei 2022). In other words, folk groups believe that *Yuanshengtai* is almost synonymous with everyday life practices.

In this regard, the primary objects that should be considered in the construction of *Yuanshengtai* seem to be left out of this process, existing more as perceived objects. In practice, however, folk groups actively integrate into its construction. In particular, folk Reba artists actively create and perform Reba dance works under *Yuanshengtai*. In their view, traditional values and modern advantages are not contradictory. For many folk artists, engagement with state policies and technologies is viewed as a way to enhance the viability of tradition and uplift social status.

In conclusion, *Yuanshengtai* is interpreted differently by various stakeholders, and its concept is diverse and contentious. These interpretations reflect the influence of national agendas, intellectual debates on cultural preservation, and the practical needs of folk groups. The authors assert that *Yuanshengtai* performances result from complex negotiations and constructions by these actors, which shape the preservation and development

of Reba dance. Thus, *Yuanshengtai* influences how Reba dance is performed and broader trends in its inheritance and protection.

### Reconstructing Reba Dance: The Role of *Yuanshengtai* in Contemporary Performances

As a primary means of inheritance for Reba dance in the contemporary context, *Yuanshengtai* performances constitute a form of knowledge production and social practice. This form stems from the need of the modern urbanite to perceive and understand diverse cultural practices and involves authorised heritage discourse and knowledge authority. While the government and intellectuals emphasise *Yuanshengtai* to symbolise cultural authenticity and promote national identity, folk artists view these performances as a means to secure resources and support. This contrast highlights the differing motivations behind the reconstruction of Reba dance, with the state aiming for symbolic integration and folk performers focusing on cultural survival and livelihood.

In collaboration with intellectuals, the Chinese government strategically mobilises ethnic folk cultural resources to organise and curate dance performances and competitions. This measure is instrumental in driving the innovation and reproduction of folk dances, including Reba dance. By selecting, reconstructing, arranging, and presenting traditional movements, drumbeats, and performance content, these staged performances not only adapt traditional elements but also reframe them to serve contemporary cultural and political agendas.

The reproduction of Reba dance is primarily reflected in the richness of movements, content, forms, and functions within Reba dance performances. These aspects of richness are influenced by changing production methods and living environments. Such changes have led to adaptive selection in traditional ethnic dances. Additionally, artistic self-discipline determines that they are constantly self-adjusting and evolving (Lin, 38). The transition of folk arts from folk settings to stage settings is a driving force behind this trend. Reba dance presented on stage incorporates modern technological means to enhance its expressive power and vitality while preserving traditional content and forms.

New forms and content of Reba dance presentations emerged from stage performances. A notable example is the 1983 dance drama *Reba Love*, which uses traditional Reba dance elements to address the developmental needs of socialist ethnic dance and explore dance drama's artistic rules. It depicts the hardships of Reba artists wandering and performing under the feudal serfdom system in eastern Tibet, employing the artistic expression techniques of dance drama and drawing on artistic forms such as Chinese classical dance, ballet, and symphony music. As the first Tibetan ethnic dance drama, *Reba Love* represents a state-supported innovation that positions Reba dance within socialist and national cultural narratives (Gao, Ha, & Thiagarajan, 2024). It sets an example for creating and performing ethnic dance works in the Tibetan region (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dance Drama *Reba Love*

(Source: Committee for the Compilation of The Dictionary of Chinese Ethnic Minority Arts, 1991)

Traditional Reba dance primarily involves one-beat, three-beat, six-beat, and nine-beat drum rhythms and their corresponding dance vocabulary. *Zeji* introduced innovations to these rhythms and dance vocabulary, categorising primary hand, foot, and drum positions and directions for dance postures. She also developed new rhythm variations, such as one-beat drumming while walking or flipping, three-beat drumming with left and right flips, etc. These innovations have been gradually promoted through classroom teaching practices and are widely applied in various stage productions featuring Reba dance elements.

Drum Dance for *Qamdo* is a significant large-scale group dance production created in 2020 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of *Qamdo's* liberation. Choreographed by *Zeji*, it features nearly a hundred professional and amateur dancers across the Tibet Autonomous Region, earning it the media nickname ‘Hundred People Reba’ (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Hundred People Reba Dance Works: Drum Dance for *Qamdo*  
(Source: Taken by Author on 12th July 2021, Qamdo, Tibet)

The dance work aims to showcase the enriching folk dance culture in Tibet through the performances while also praising the high-quality urban development and the peaceful and contented lives of the people in *Qamdo* under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (*Xiazhu*, personal communication, Aug 22, 2018, in Tibet). Unlike family-based Reba performances, the large-scale production Drum Dance for *Qamdo* represents the institutionalisation of Reba as a tool for regional image-building and ideological celebration.

In conclusion, the authors argue that the performance of the *Yuanshengtai* Reba dance plays a crucial role in contemporary inheritance, promoting knowledge production and social practices. Staged *Yuanshengtai* performances selectively incorporate traditional elements but differ fundamentally from lived traditions embedded in local community life. Contemporary inheritance involves cooperation between the government and intellectuals, mobilising resources and professional knowledge to achieve the invention and reproduction of Reba dance. This distinction underscores how staged performances aim to fulfil modern audiences' expectations while preserving an image of cultural authenticity.

### Reshaping Artistic Experiences of Reba Dance Based on *Yuanshengtai* Performances

*Yuanshengtai* Reba dance performances do not simply reproduce tradition; they also reshape how folk artists and intellectuals engage with its transmission and meaning. Specific dance movements, drum rhythms, costumes, music, settings, and performance styles constitute people's cognitive experience of Reba dance. This cognitive experience adjusts and reinforces the cultural imagination of Reba dance among outsiders, influencing their preconceived notions and interpretations of Tibetan culture and its artistic expressions. At the same time, this experience is integrated into the social culture of Tibet's folk, reshaping actors, especially folk artists, in their artistic experience of Reba dance.

This reshaping mainly stems from changes in the performance space, inheritance methods, and participation methods of Reba dance. Traditional Reba dance was primarily active in folk fields, spreading in



the footsteps of wandering Reba artists. Although some performances might occur during Tibetan festivals or religious activities, the performance spaces were always limited to the folk areas, with the participants limited to folk groups. Officially organised, staged performances broke these geographical and identity limitations and developed a normative mechanism for diverse actors' practice. Folk groups traditionally regarded Reba dance as a practice exclusive to itinerant artists within specific communities. This perception was reshaped by staged performances, which encouraged locals to use dance as a platform to showcase their culture and improve their living conditions.

Families usually conducted traditional Reba dance performances. These families would often compete with each other, resulting in rare occurrences of multiple Reba families present at the same time and space. In addition, performances did not involve professional dancers from art institutions or universities, although Reba dance had developed professional and stylised features in its inheritance process. However, performances or competitions themed around Reba dance often brought together folk Reba performance groups and individuals (including members of Reba families) from different regions and professional dancers from universities and art institutions. Different groups, styles, and regions converged on these performances, facilitating artistic experience sharing, exchange and interaction related to Reba dance. These performances enabled folk groups to express their cultural perspectives while also incorporating professional aesthetics into their artistic practices. Folk groups gradually incorporated this set of professional aesthetics into their daily practices and appreciation and creation of art, reshaping their aesthetic perception and artistic experience of Reba dance performances.

Traditionally, Reba dance was transmitted within families and performed by itinerant artists. The inheritance and development of Reba dance were incorporated into the national agenda for national cultural development with the implication of national intangible cultural heritage protection work, and the role of Reba artists gradually gained recognition from society and the state. Some Reba artists were awarded the title of artist or representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage supported by the government, improving their social status and living conditions.

Furthermore, it was difficult for ordinary people to participate in performances due to the extensive training required over a long period. With the promotion of staged Reba dance performances, local communities began to re-examine their own culture. During the COVID-19 epidemic, the government of the Tibet Autonomous Region, in collaboration with local intellectuals, actively responded to the state initiative of "National Fitness," creating and developing the Reba Dance Fitness Exercise, shown in Figure 5 (Z. Gao, Personal communication, September 3, 2021, Lhasa, Tibet).



Figure 5. Reba Dance Fitness Exercise in Tibet National Fitness Series Activities  
(Source: Taken by author on 3 September 2021, Lhasa, Tibet)

The Fitness Exercises aim to improve physical fitness by coordinating drumming and movement steps. In 2021, the Sunset Red Art Troupe participated in the "Reba Dance Fitness Exercise" as part of the national fitness series of activities organised by the Tibet Autonomous Region Sports Bureau to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and received acclaim. "Reba Dance Fitness Exercise" was promoted in Tibet and widely disseminated on major online media platforms. Thus, the Reba dance has not only been endowed with new functions but has also become a form of performance accessible to everyone.

In summary, *Yuanshengtai* Reba dance performances represent a process of knowledge reproduction and social practice centred on the inheritance and development of Reba dance. This process has reshaped Reba dance through changes in inheritance methods, performance spaces, participant groups, the social roles and status of Reba artists, and participation methods, thereby influencing the value judgments and artistic experiences of those involved.

### Conclusion

This study has examined the construction and implications of *Yuanshengtai* in the staged performances of Tibetan Reba dance within the framework of China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policies. Through an ethnographic analysis of how *Yuanshengtai* is defined, embodied, and enacted on stage, the research highlights its dual function. It serves both as a symbol of cultural authenticity and as a strategy for negotiating the tension between tradition and modernity.

While the concept of *Yuanshengtai* originates from UNESCO's notion of authenticity, it has been adapted in China as a powerful evaluative criterion for the preservation of minority cultures. In the context of Reba dance, *Yuanshengtai* has expanded beyond its original purpose. It functions as a performative and symbolic framework that selectively reconstructs tradition to align with institutional expectations and national narratives. These staged representations often remove the dance from its ritual context and everyday social functions.

The findings suggest that although the aesthetic framing of *Yuanshengtai* preserves the recognizable features of Reba dance, it also risks reducing a dynamic tradition to a fixed visual code. The emphasis on purity and unaltered form can obscure the agency and creativity of contemporary performers and choreographers. These individuals play a crucial role in ensuring the continued vitality of the tradition. As Hobsbawm (1983) noted, traditions are often created or reshaped to respond to contemporary needs, and Reba dance follows this pattern.

For cultural policymakers and choreographers, this study emphasizes the importance of balancing aesthetic presentation with ethical and cultural responsibility. While *Yuanshengtai* can promote visibility and access to institutional support, it may also simplify cultural expressions and marginalize local voices. Inclusive and negotiated frameworks are necessary to ensure that community members participate meaningfully in shaping how their traditions are represented.

For folk performers, participating in *Yuanshengtai*-based performances offers both opportunities and compromises. It provides recognition and support but often requires adaptation to institutional norms. These dynamics should not be viewed solely as distortions. Instead, they represent a process of negotiation in which tradition is continuously redefined through practice.

Future research can explore how *Yuanshengtai* is understood and applied across different performance contexts, such as festivals, competitions, and educational programmes. Investigating how authenticity is performed, challenged, and interpreted by diverse actors will help us better understand how intangible heritage is lived and sustained in everyday practice.

In conclusion, this study argues that authenticity in heritage performance is not a fixed truth. It is the result of ongoing negotiation shaped by social, political, and institutional factors. Understanding this constructed nature invites us to reflect on what we choose to preserve, why we preserve it, and who benefits from its preservation. Only by recognizing the evolving, creative, and contested character of tradition can intangible cultural heritage remain relevant and alive in the present.

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