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Culture of the Body, Wordless Utterance: The "Activation" of Traditional Chinese Culture in Dance

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Abstract: China's excellent traditional culture is the spiritual root of the Chinese nation. It carries national values, aesthetic ideals and collective memory. Dance is a performing art based on the human body. So dance has become an important carrier of traditional culture. It inherits, transforms and activates traditional culture through body language. The so-called "activation" is not a simple copy of traditional cultural symbols. It is not a static display either. It is a way to take apart traditional resources and build them again in today's art context. In this way, traditional resources get new meaning in our time. This article starts with body culture. It analyzes three dimensions: movement form, dynamic image and spiritual core. It shows how dance awakens traditional culture through the body. It also explores how traditional culture changes in today's dance creation.

Keywords: Body culture; Traditional culture; Dance art; Activation; Body narrative

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1. Introduction

Dance uses human movements to express. The body is the material of dance creation. It is also the way culture is passed on. Susanne K.Langer said that dance is an "emotional language of body movements" [1]. Body movements are not only physical movements. They also show cultural ideas from outside. The "activation" in this article is not simple restoration or copying. Words cannot fully express traditional spirit. Dance can turn still cultural resources into living body language. This is how culture is activated.

Today, research on traditional culture and dance mostly looks at case studies, classical dance history, and the protection of non-heritage dance. From the "activation" point of view, there is still room to study how dance changes traditional culture today through body form, image creation and spiritual reading. So this article takes "body culture, silent speech" as its main view. It uses the four layers of dance: shape, spirit, rhythm and soul. It discusses movement form, dynamic image, shape and spiritual core. It explores the

practical way for dance to activate traditional culture.

2. Movement form of dance: the body translation of traditional philosophy

Traditional Chinese philosophy values “circle”. The idea of the circle goes through the Chinese view of the universe, life, and beauty. Zhou Yi says, “heaven is strong, and the way of heaven is round”. Old Chinese people believed that everything in the universe moves in circles and starts again. “Round” means perfection, harmony, and going back. The Confucian idea of moderation and the Taoist idea of the round universe both push this beauty. This idea did not stay in books. It settled in the body beauty of the Chinese nation. It can be seen in the movements of classical dance and folk dance. Dance uses body movement to turn the abstract idea of “circle” into visible action. In this way, traditional philosophy is activated.

2.1. The movement route of “three circles” in Chinese classical dance

After the body rhythm system of Chinese classical dance was built, the traditional “circle” idea was summed up in the “three circles” rule. They are the flat circle, the standing circle and the eight-character circle [2]. This rule became the core movement rule of classical dance. It shows the Confucian idea of moderation at the level of the body.

The flat circle is mostly used around the waist and shoulders at the same level. It looks like turning the waist between clouds. The standing circle moves in vertical space. It looks like a wheel. The eight-character circle moves like the number 8 lying down. It looks like a wind wheel or a fire wheel. The three circles do not stand alone. They work together and run through the whole classical dance method. The circle step is also a basic step. It keeps moving in circles. The dancer keeps circling in the stage space. In this way, the space also becomes round at the level of movement design.

This body movement logic is the physical form of the “round” idea in traditional culture. Confucian moderation opposes extremes, straightness and sharpness. It values subtlety, harmony and roundabout ways. Dancers do not need straight lines. Body arcs and leaning postures can show these unclear traditional ideas on stage. When the limbs join together, the audience can feel the beauty of the traditional nation. The philosophy in the old books comes out of the text and becomes a visible body culture.

2.2. The body law of “rounding” in folk dance

“Round” is also common in the folk dance of all Chinese ethnic groups. It comes from what working people do in daily life. In the Han Jiaozhou paddy song dance, the movement twists the waist and turns. The body keeps circling. The wrist keeps winding like a flower. The fan keeps moving in circles. In Mongolian dance, the arms move softly and roundly. It shows the sun and the moon turning. It also shows wind blowing grass and waves seen by nomads. In Tibetan dance, the knees keep bending and stretching. This forms a cycle. This rhythm carries the idea of life and rebirth in Tibetan culture. The circle in folk dance does not come from literati philosophy. It comes from daily life and folk belief. The circle dance that begins in a sacrificial ceremony shows respect for the cycle of heaven and earth. The work cycle slowly becomes a ring rhythm of the body. Folk dance activates the “round” culture rooted in folk life. The body is passed on from generation to generation. In this way, the traditional beauty hidden in folk habits keeps growing.

3. Dynamic images of dance movements: stage rebirth of traditional visual and artistic resources

A dynamic image is an artistic feeling built through body poses, stage pictures, and costumes. Dance uses the body as its medium. It takes visual images out and turns still images into living stage performances. In this way, old images become living body art. This is what I mean by "dancing the shape". It wakes old visual symbols on the stage.

3.1. Posture modeling and stage composition: from static cultural relics to living bodies

Dunhuang art is a bright part of China's traditional cultural treasures. In the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang, tens of thousands of murals and colored sculptures have been preserved. They show the social life, religious beliefs, and the beauty of clothing in the Middle Ages. They are very precious image records. To activate Dunhuang culture, dance must turn the still images on the murals into flowing human performance.

In 1954, Mr. Dai Ailian created the dance "Flying in the Sky". It brought Dunhuang mural images on stage for the first time. The work takes out the elegant pose of the fairy in the mural. Long sleeves help show the flying image in the mural. This was the first stage change of the grotto images. In 1979, the big ethnic dance drama "Silk Road Flower Rain" reached the peak of Dunhuang dance creation. The drama dug deeply into mural materials. It brought back the classic dance pose "rebound lute". It created the unique "three bends" pose of Dunhuang art. The dance moves of playing the rebounding lute have a strong sense of beauty in the mural. The drama did not copy a single shape. It joined the still moments of the mural into a flowing dance. The characters in the mural walked out of the grotto. They acted and told stories on stage [3].

After "Silk Road Flower Rain", Mr. Gao Jinrong sorted out the poses and movements in the Dunhuang murals. He used the old materials of Western music and dance. He built a teaching system for Dunhuang dance. He put Dunhuang dance into the Chinese classical dance school. Since then, Dunhuang is not only a mural in the grotto. It has training materials, theories and stage works. It enters the classroom and the theater. It enters the public view.

Many other dance works also use poses from old paintings and sculptures. The creator does not copy the still shape. The creator looks for the culture behind the shape. The creator turns the still moment into a real action. In this way, the old cultural image is expressed.

3.2. Clothing props: Expand the cultural story of the body

Dance does not use only the human body. Costumes and props extend the dancer's body. They become important carriers of traditional culture. Old costumes and objects carry deep cultural meaning. When they meet the dancing body, they become part of the body story.

The long silk sleeves in Dunhuang dance come from the flying ribbons in the murals. The long silk leaves the body. They fly in the air with the dancer's movement. It shows the lucky clouds and flying images in the murals. The water sleeves and swords come from Chinese opera. The fans, handkerchiefs, and drums in folk dance are also old objects incorporated into dance. The props carry traditional cultural symbols. They work with the body movements to build cultural images.

The use of props cares about both spirit and form. It should not just pile up old symbols. The props should become part of the body's cultural expression [4].

3.3. Form norms of dance: absorption and reconstruction of traditional arts of martial arts and Chinese opera

Martial arts come from the traditional Chinese philosophy of life. They focus on training the body and the mind. Chinese opera puts singing, dance and acting together. It keeps many old dance forms. So it is called the "living fossil" of ancient dance. Both have mature body training systems and clear aesthetic ideas. After the People's Republic of China was founded, the development of the Chinese classical dance subject took a lot from martial arts and Chinese opera. It chose and rebuilt the traditional body culture. In this way, martial arts and Chinese opera culture were activated in our time. This subject is called "dance rhyme".

3.4. The absorption and spiritual translation of martial arts culture by dance

Martial arts are a body movement system of the Chinese nation. Martial arts have skills. They also carry traditional philosophical ideas. Martial arts care about the inside and the outside. They care about form and spirit. So martial arts and dance have much in common. Both use the human body as the carrier. Both care about the movement of the body, breath, and strength. But their aims are different. Martial arts aim at attack and defense. Dance aims at beauty. When dance activates martial arts culture, it does not copy the skills. It takes away the fighting function. It keeps the body skills and the ideas. Then it turns them into the body language of dance.

Chinese classical dance uses a lot of martial arts skills. Skills like turning over, spinning and sweeping legs come from martial arts flipping. For training with props, the martial arts sword becomes the classical sword dance. It keeps the charm of swordsmanship. It drops the fighting function. It strengthens the lyrical meaning. The step method takes ideas from martial arts to make the footwork of classical dance richer. The body method takes the martial arts idea "the waist is the axis." All movements start from the waist. The body drives the limbs.

Classical dance also learns the ideas of martial arts. It takes the theory of "three sections and six in one" and builds its own body beauty. The "three sections" divide the limbs into top joints, middle joints and root joints. The "six sections" divide them into the inner three and the outer three. The inner three are the heart and the mind, the mind and the breath, the breath and the strength. The outer three are the hands and feet, the elbows and knees, the shoulders and hips. This theory first served martial arts and techniques. It cares about the unity of body and mind. Classical dance takes this theory and turns it into training rules for the body and the mind. Dancers have to keep the mind, the breath, and the body together. They have to bring the body and the mind into one.

After this change, the strong spirit of martial arts comes into dance. The fine beauty of traditional dance also comes in. Together, they make the rhythmic beauty of classical dance.

3.5. The second awakening of dance to Chinese opera culture

Chinese opera came from the old songs and dances of early times. After thousands of years, many old dance elements are still kept in it. The work and the body in Chinese opera are the living remains of ancient dance after long change. But Chinese opera puts singing, reading, acting and fighting together. Its dance body serves the story. It depends on the script and the singing. It is not an independent dance art. In the 1950s, Mr. Ouyang Yuqian said that classical dance should learn from Chinese opera. Then classical dance began to look for resources in Chinese opera.

When dance activates Chinese opera culture, it revives old resources for the second time. Chinese opera dance is the first inheritance of ancient dance. The new Chinese classical dance subject takes away the singing and the reading of Chinese opera. It takes the core of the Chinese opera body. It refines and simplifies it. It rebuilds it. It sets up its own training and performance system. This system is the body rhyme school. It keeps the beauty that Chinese opera cares about: form and spirit, round flow, real and empty. Many classical dance movements come from the Chinese opera body. Examples are cloud hand, swallow crossing the forest and turning waist between clouds.

However, the body rhythm of classical dance does not copy the Chinese opera body directly. The Chinese opera body serves the characters. Its program is very strong. Classical dance takes away these limits. It changes the way of movement. It makes the dance more lyrical. It turns the Chinese opera program into a common dance body language. The body wisdom in Chinese opera leaves the opera stage. It stays alive in independent dance art. It first belonged to the body beauty of Chinese opera. In dance, it gets a new space to grow. In this way, Chinese opera body culture is activated in our time.

4. Spiritual interpretation of dance: national symbols continue in our time

The activation of traditional culture is not only about old objects and old skills. It also includes spiritual symbols. These symbols have settled in the collective memory of the nation. They have gone beyond the material things. They stand for the national spirit. This is the “soul dance”. Dance reads the national spirit behind the symbols with the body. In this way, the soul of the national culture still speaks in our time.

The Yellow River is a typical spiritual symbol of the Chinese nation. As the mother river, it carries the collective memory of the nation. It stands for the endless and strong national character. Long ago, it became a cultural symbol. It is not only a river on the map. Many kinds of dances have been created about the Yellow River. Each one shows the same image in its own body language. The classical dance “Yellow River” uses the strong body language of classical dance. The folk dance “Oriental Red” uses the simple and warm body language of folk dance. The modern ballet “Yellow River Soul” uses Western ballet skills and brings in the spirit of the Chinese nation. The modern dance “We Saw the River Bank” looks at the people and the ethnic history with modern body language. At the 11th Lotus Award, there was also a street dance “Yellow River”. It used the street dance language that young people know well to show the spirit of the Yellow River.

Different dances use different body language. They all point to the strong national spirit behind the Yellow River. With different body expressions at different times, this old national spirit stays deep in the hearts of today’s audience.

Other symbols and spirits, such as the five-star red flag and patriotism, also often appear in dance works. Dance does not use words to teach. It uses the body and the power of the group. It turns the spirit of the country into a feeling that the audience can feel. This spiritual activation does not mean repeating old movements. It means finding the national values behind the old symbols. Then it shows them with the life experience of today. In this way, the national spirit stays alive in the new era.

5. Conclusion

The body holds culture. Silent body movements carry the beauty, the philosophy, and the spirit that a nation has gathered for many years. To activate traditional culture in dance is to translate culture with the body. It

keeps the spiritual symbols in the national memory. It tells the story of the new era with the body [5].

"Activation" does not keep traditional culture in the past. It gives old culture new life today. Dance uses the body to build a bridge between the old and the new. In this way, old and distant traditional culture can come out of the museum and the old books. It can go on the stage. It can reach the people. In today's dance creation, we should keep using the body as a special cultural carrier. We should keep looking for China's fine traditional cultural resources. We should use the body to speak of the national culture. We should move national dance art forward. We should build solid national cultural confidence.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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