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The Concrete Expression and Presentation of Traditional Aesthetics in China Classical Dance

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Abstract: As an artistic carrier of China's excellent traditional culture, the core charm of Chinese classical dance is rooted in the profound soil of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Traditional aesthetics is not an abstract philosophical concept, but a highly concrete artistic presentation achieved through physical forms, movement rhythms, stage ambiance, and emotional expression. This paper takes the core categories of traditional Chinese aesthetics as its theoretical foundation, systematically elucidating aesthetic spirits such as qi-yun (vital energy and rhythm), form and spirit, hardness and softness, roundness and curvature, artistic conception, and harmony. It analyzes the concrete expression paths of traditional aesthetics in Chinese classical dance from four dimensions: movement language, body rhythm, stage performance, and repertoire creation. By combining classic dance works, it examines their presentation methods and artistic value, aiming to reveal the intrinsic laws of classical dance- "to convey the Dao through dance and to transmit the spirit through beauty" -and provide theoretical support and aesthetic guidance for the creation, teaching, and performance of classical dance.

Keywords: China classical dance; traditional aesthetics; figurative expression; artistic presentation; vivid energy; form and spirit

1. Introduction

China classical dance is a national dance system formed on the basis of inheriting Chinese opera, martial arts, classical poetry, and the aesthetics of calligraphy and painting. It is not only a display of physical skills but also a dynamic externalization of China's traditional philosophy, aesthetic tastes, and humanistic spirit. From the music and dance of the Book of Songs to the music and dance of the Tang and Song dynasties, from the postures of opera to contemporary classical dance creations, traditional aesthetics has always run through them, becoming the soul of classical dance.

For a long time, classical dance research has focused on technical training, body rhythm systems, or repertoire analysis, lacking a systematic exploration of how traditional aesthetics can be transformed from abstract concepts into tangible dance language that is visible, perceptible, and comprehensible. In the context of contemporary dance creation increasingly pursuing internationalization and visual appeal, some works exhibit tendencies of prioritizing form over substance, technique over artistic conception, and visual impact over cultural depth, leading to the weakening of traditional aesthetic spirit. Therefore, in-depth research on the concrete expression and presentation of traditional aesthetics in China's classical dance is not only necessary for returning to the essence of ethnic dance but also crucial for promoting the innovation and preservation of China's classical dance. This paper, grounded in the core ideas of traditional aesthetics, combines body language, movement paradigms, stage imagery, and classic works to

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comprehensively analyze the concrete pathways of traditional aesthetics, showcasing the unique aesthetic character and cultural charm of China's classical dance.

2. The Intrinsic Connection Between China Classical Dance and Traditional Aesthetics

2.1. Traditional aesthetics is the spiritual core of China classical dance

The aesthetic pursuit of Chinese classical dance is highly unified with the philosophical thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism emphasizes ritual order, harmony, and dignity; Taoism pursues naturalness, ethereality, and rhythm; Buddhism focuses on artistic conception, mind nature, and negative space. These ideas collectively form the aesthetic foundation of classical dance. The movement norms, breathing techniques, and stage artistic conception of classical dance are all physical projections of traditional aesthetic concepts.

2.2. Classical Dance as the Dynamic Embodiment of Traditional Aesthetics

The classical aesthetics of "vibrant energy and rhythm," "harmony of form and spirit," "interplay of reality and illusion," and "the beauty of balance" cannot be fully conveyed through words and images alone. They must be transformed into tangible dance language through physical movement, rhythm, and spatial expression. Classical dance uses the body as its brush, motion as its lines, and artistic conception as its canvas, converting abstract aesthetics into concrete artistry. This approach achieves the goal of "expressing beauty through dance and conveying essence through movement."

2.3. The symbiosis and mutual prosperity of the two elements constitute the aesthetic identity of ethnic dance

The distinction of Chinese classical dance from ballet, modern dance, and folk dance lies in its unique aesthetic system. Traditional aesthetics endow classical dance with spiritual depth, while classical dance gives traditional aesthetics a form of life. The two complement each other, forming a unique dance aesthetic paradigm of the Chinese nation, which has become an important symbol for the dissemination of Chinese culture abroad.

3. Core Categories and Connotations of China's Traditional Aesthetics

The traditional aesthetic system of China is vast, and the core categories directly related to classical dance and highly concrete can be summarized into six aesthetic concepts, which together constitute the aesthetic skeleton of classical dance.

Vibrant Qi and Rhythm-The Beauty of Life. "Qi" is the origin of life, representing breath, strength, and inner spirit; "Rhythm" is the grace and charm, embodying the rhythm, cadence, and flavor of movements. Vibrant Qi and Rhythm requires dance to be driven by inner breath to achieve the harmony of Qi and strength, strength and rhythm, and rhythm and spirit, which is the highest aesthetic principle of China's classical dance.

Form and Spirit in Harmony: The Aesthetic of Expressive Beauty. "Form" refers to physical posture, movement trajectories, and technical skills; "Spirit" denotes eye expression, emotional resonance, artistic conception, and spiritual essence. Classical dance pursues the expression of spirit through form, where spirit guides and form follows, opposing mechanical imitation and emphasizing the unity of precise external appearance and intrinsic charm.

The beauty of line, influenced by the traditional philosophy of "roundness" and the aesthetics of calligraphy and painting, classical dance pursues that no dance is complete without roundness and no posture without curves. The movement routes are mainly round, curved, arc and round, emphasizing roundness and roundness, rotation and flow, reflecting the aesthetic pursuit of harmony and perfection.

The Balance of Strength and Flexibility-The Beauty of Dialectics: Strength manifests as uprightness, power, and abruptness; flexibility as grace, expansiveness, and fluidity.

Classical dance movements emphasize the interplay of strength within flexibility and flexibility within strength, the combination of motion and stillness, and the interdependence of speed and slowness, embodying the philosophical wisdom of yin-yang complementarity and dialectical unity.

The interplay of reality and illusion-The beauty of artistic conception lies in the interplay of movement, physicality, and rhythm; the void represents negative space, imagination, and artistic conception. Classical dance emphasizes the use of the tangible to highlight the intangible, and the intangible to accentuate the tangible. Through spatial negative space, pauses in movement, and the extension of gaze, it creates a subtle and profound artistic conception, leaving room for the viewer's imagination.

The Beauty of Character: Harmony and Elegance. "Harmony" represents the highest realm of Confucian aesthetics, emphasizing moderation, subtlety, dignity, and elegance while opposing ostentation, exaggeration, and flamboyance. Classical dance pursues a gentle temperament, dignified posture, and measured dynamics, embodying the Chinese nation's cultural character of restraint and humility.

4. The Concrete Expression Path of Traditional Aesthetics in China Classical Dance

Traditional aesthetics is not a theory floating on the dance, but a complete concrete expression system which permeates the body, movement, rhythm, space and performance of classical dance.

4.1. Body Shape: Shaping with "Li" to Present the Beauty of Harmony and Dignity

The body posture of China classical dance is a direct embodiment of traditional etiquette aesthetics and the aesthetics of harmony. Standing requires a straight head, neck, relaxed shoulders, upright waist, taut abdomen, and tucked buttocks, forming a "suspended crown and upright spine" posture. The arm posture emphasizes roundness, curvature, softness, and expansiveness, creating classic hand positions such as lifting the collar, mountain shoulder, pressing the palm, and supporting the palm, with smooth lines that maintain dignity. The lower limb posture focuses on stability, sinking, roundness, and agility, with measured and steady steps, reflecting the beauty of ritual order and the beauty of centrality. This body posture rejects excessive outward display and exaggerated distortion, pursuing a visual effect of restraint, elegance, and dignity, which is the physical manifestation of the Confucian aesthetic ideal of "refined and substantial, then a gentleman."

4.2. Action Language: Presenting the Beauty of Flow and Harmony with the Method of "Circle"

The construction of classical Chinese dance movements is centered on the principle of "circle," with all movement trajectories, force application methods, and transition logic revolving around the concept of "circle," representing a highly concrete manifestation of traditional "harmonious circle" aesthetics. In arm movements, circular paths such as cloud hands, swaying hands, coiling hands, and threading hands are formed, achieving circular starts and finishes, continuous and unbroken. In body dynamics, the core principles of "twisting, tilting, circling, and bending" are emphasized, creating a swirling form with the waist as the axis and the body resembling a wheel. In footwork, circular steps and flower-clapper steps are exemplified, characterized by light, rounded, and seamless transitions. The aesthetics of "circle" render classical dance movements free of sharp edges and abrupt stops, presenting a visual beauty of flowing clouds and ceaseless circulation, perfectly embodying the harmonious concept of "unity between heaven and humanity."

4.3. Breathing Rhythm: Controlling Power with Qi to Present the Beauty of Dynamic Qi Rhythm

Breathing is the soul of classical dance and the most direct tangible carrier of "vibrant energy and rhythm." The breathing in classical dance is not natural respiration, but rather

an artistic breathing that is highly coordinated with movements, involving techniques such as lifting, sinking, thrusting, leaning, containing, protruding, and shifting.

As the breath rises upward, the body flows with lightness; as it sinks downward, stability and weight are achieved. When released outward, the breath extends power; when drawn inward, it embodies restraint. The breath drives muscles, limbs, and rhythm, creating a dynamic interplay of lightness and heaviness, speed and slowness, and cadence. The tension and release of breath determine the movement's firmness or suppleness, while its continuity shapes the dance's energy flow. This breath-infused vitality infuses the dance with life force, achieving the vivid beauty of "the breath permeating the entire body without a trace of stagnation."

4.4. Eye Expression: Leading Dance with Spirit, Presenting the Beauty of Form and Spirit

"Eyes are the seed of the heart," the gaze embodies the essence of classical dance's "harmony of form and spirit." In classical dance, the eyes follow the hands, the gaze follows the posture, and the spirit is conveyed through the eyes. The focus, release, concentration, rotation, retraction, and elevation of the gaze all carry emotions and artistic conception. A fixed gaze conveys calmness, a flowing gaze reveals agility, a distant look suggests vastness, and a lowered brow expresses restraint. The eyes precede the movements, and even after the movements cease, the gaze lingers. Through the eyes, the dancer communicates inner emotions, the character's state of mind, and the stage's artistic conception to the audience, achieving "conveying spirit through the eyes and emotion through the spirit." This elevates dance beyond physical expression to a realm of spiritual expression.

4.5. Spatial Rhythm: Emphasizing the Real with the Void, Presenting the Beauty of the Artistic Conception of Blank Space

The application of space and rhythm in Chinese classical dance is deeply influenced by the aesthetics of "negative space" in traditional calligraphy and painting, as well as the poetic imagery of Chinese poetry, achieving a concrete presentation of the interplay between the real and the imaginary. Spatially, movements occupy the "real space," while pauses and extensions form the "imaginary space," combining motion and stillness, density and sparsity to create an ethereal atmosphere. Rhythmically, it emphasizes being slow yet continuous, fast yet orderly, paused yet uninterrupted, and extended yet cohesive. Pauses create negative space, while extensions expand imagination, allowing the dance to "have finite words but infinite meaning." This treatment of space and rhythm makes classical dance avoid fullness and crowding, instead pursuing openness, ethereality, and depth, akin to the subtle and enduring charm of Chinese ink paintings, embodying the essence of Eastern aesthetics.

4.6. Stage Image: Creating a Scene with Emotion, Presenting the Poetic and Expressive Beauty

Classical dance performances prioritize artistic expression over literal representation, crafting poetic imagery through movements, props, costumes, and stage composition—a concrete embodiment of traditional aesthetics. The flowing water sleeves embody "qi yun" (vital energy), the folding fan's rhythm reflects "xu shi" (contrast between void and solid), the sword's balance of hardness and softness mirrors "yin yang" (yin and yang), while the graceful body movements convey "yi jing" (artistic conception). Stage designs emphasize symmetry, equilibrium, circularity, and fluidity, embodying the beauty of harmony. Emotional delivery is subtle, restrained, and profound, eschewing direct outpouring to showcase the elegance of moderation. For the audience, the dance is not just physical movement but a flowing classical painting, a tangible Eastern artistic conception.

5. Analysis of the Presentation of Traditional Aesthetics in Classic Classical Dance Works

The concrete expression of traditional aesthetics is ultimately fully realized in theatrical productions. The following analysis examines the practical implementation of aesthetic principles through various classic works.

5.1. Works of the Body-Rhythm School: Tachun and Mulan Gui: A Model of Qi-Yun and the Balance of Hardness and Softness

The essence of classical dance lies in its body rhythm. "Treading Spring" builds upon the foundational techniques of lifting, sinking, thrusting, and leaning, featuring graceful, fluid movements and continuous breath flow. It harmonizes the agility of a maiden with the vitality of spring, vividly embodying the beauty of "vibrant energy" and "meandering curves." "Mulan Returns" masterfully blends strength and gentleness, combining the vigor of martial arts with the grace of femininity. Its movements are powerful yet measured, perfectly illustrating the aesthetic ideal of "harmonizing strength and softness" and "integrating form and spirit."

5.2. Poetic Works: Dian Jiang Chun and Luo Shen-The Ultimate of Artistic Conception and Harmony

"Pointed Crimson Lips" explores the theme of a woman's secluded lament, featuring restrained gestures and lingering, melancholic gazes. The composition employs ample negative space and a slow, continuous rhythm, pushing the aesthetics of "the interplay of reality and illusion" and "negative space in artistic conception" to their limits. Every smile, every frown, every movement, and every stillness becomes poetic. "The Goddess of Luo" embodies ethereal grace and dignified elegance, with a poised posture and graceful lines that reflect the Taoist ideals of "harmony and refinement" and "lightness and transcendence," crafting an extraordinary classical goddess.

6. The Contemporary Value of Traditional Aesthetic Concrete Expression in the Development of China's Classical Dance

To consolidate the foundation of national aesthetics and avoid cultural aphasia, in the context of globalized dance, the concrete expression of traditional aesthetics enables China's classical dance to maintain its unique national character, preventing blind imitation of Western dance that would lose its intrinsic characteristics, thus forming an irreplaceable Eastern aesthetic symbol.

Enhancing the artistic connotation and transcending technical traps, traditional aesthetics have transformed classical dance from "skill demonstration" to "expression of artistic conception," and from "physical movement" to "spiritual transmission," elevating the cultural depth and artistic height of the works to achieve the unity of technique and philosophy. Promoting cultural inheritance and dissemination, telling the story of China well, classical dance uses the body as a language, concretizing, artisticizing, and internationalizing traditional aesthetics and Chinese culture, becoming a high-quality carrier for external cultural communication, enabling the world to understand Chinese aesthetics and Chinese spirit through dance.

7. Inheritance and Innovation Path of Traditional Aesthetics in China's Classical Dance in the New Era

Returning to the essence of dance, we must strengthen the foundational teaching of body rhythm and aesthetics. In classical dance education, it's not enough to focus solely on technical skills; we must also emphasize training in breathing, spirit, eye contact, and artistic conception, enabling students to fundamentally understand the body logic of traditional aesthetics. By delving into cultural heritage, we can draw inspiration from traditional arts-extracting imagery from poetry, calligraphy, opera, martial arts, and intangible cultural heritage-to transform aesthetic principles into innovative movement languages and stage imagery, avoiding creative homogenization. Upholding tradition

while innovating, we achieve modern expression of traditional aesthetics. While preserving core elements like qi-yun (vital energy), form and spirit, circular curves, and artistic conception, we integrate modern stage techniques, musical vocabulary, and narrative approaches to align traditional aesthetics with contemporary tastes, breathing new life into them. Through cross-disciplinary collaboration, we expand the boundaries of aesthetic expression by partnering with cultural tourism, theater, digital media, and intangible cultural heritage preservation. By incorporating classical dance aesthetics into live performances, digital art, and cultural products, we create multidimensional and immersive communication.

8. Conclusion

China classical dance is a "living body epic" of traditional aesthetics. Traditional aesthetics is not an abstract cultural symbol, but a complete, systematic, and highly artistic concrete expression achieved through body forms, movement language, breathing rhythm, expressive eye contact, spatial rhythm, and stage imagery. The six aesthetic spirits-vibrant energy, harmony of form and spirit, smooth and flowing curves, balance of hardness and softness, interplay of reality and illusion, and elegance and propriety-collectively construct the unique aesthetic character and cultural soul of China classical dance.

The development of China's classical dance in the new era must adhere to the foundation of traditional aesthetics, continuously deepen concrete expression and modern expression, innovate while upholding the right path, and develop through inheritance. Let China's classical dance stand tall in the world of dance with a more distinct national character, deeper cultural connotation, and more moving artistic charm, allowing Eastern aesthetics to shine with eternal brilliance through the art of the body.

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