

Understanding Embodiment and Existentialism in Contemporary Chinese Dance

Weiwei Qin¹, Farideh Alizadeh²

Faculty of Create Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: s2182176@siswa.um.edu.my¹, farideh@um.edu.my²

Abstract

This paper employs the theoretical framework of phenomenology of the body to explore embodiment and existentialism in contemporary Chinese dance. With the backdrop of the current status and influence of Chinese contemporary dance in the realm of dance arts, it analyzes the unique forms and techniques of bodily expression in Chinese contemporary dance, attempting to explore how personal emotions, inner experiences, and spiritual states are conveyed through bodily expression in Chinese contemporary dance. The paper utilizes case analysis and observational research methods to delve into the cognition of bodily expression and identity construction in Chinese contemporary dance, as well as how the body is used to reflect on the cognition and positioning of Chinese traditional and modern cultural identities, exploring the diversity and changes in Chinese cultural identity. Finally, by applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body theory, it deeply analyzes the significance and existentialism of bodily expression in contemporary Chinese dance, experiencing and understanding the relationship between bodily subjectivity and self through dance. Through these studies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of bodily expression in contemporary Chinese dance, enabling dancers to reassess their ability to express emotions, as well as the application and insights of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body therein.

Keywords: bodily expression, subjective experience, existentialism, contemporary dance, cultural identity.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Chinese dance, as a unique art form that merges traditional culture with modern expression, combines China's ethnic attributes with Western modern dance to form the distinctive Chinese Western dance. In recent years, it has gradually gained prominence in the Chinese dance scene, showcasing unique bodily expression and artistic charm. Simultaneously, it represents an important breakthrough in the development of Chinese traditional dance within the context of contemporary times. Through diverse linguistic forms and progressive aesthetic

connotations, contemporary dance interprets the cultural ethos of modern Chinese society. From the perspective of performance body, contemporary dance exhibits a rich variety of bodily expressions and imagery. Just as our understanding of dance expression entails: the emotions expressed by dancers' bodies reflect the inner emotional states of others, thus in the process of expression, we can recognize others' emotions, thoughts, intentions, and so forth. At least, we believe there exists an inherent, inseparable relationship between one's body and their psyche(Luo, 2022).In the attempt to express consciousness through art, besides verbal communication, the most crucial aspect is bodily communication. However, when the body is subjected to different voices and identity recognitions from various worlds, our bodily consciousness and expression may suffer from understanding biases. This undoubtedly poses a challenge for contemporary dance. Dancers, when faced with the expression of contemporary dance, also encounter some challenges and dilemmas. Influenced by traditional dance concepts and modern aesthetic views, some dancers may excessively pursue technique and form in their performances, neglecting the expression of emotions and inner experiences. Merleau-Ponty, in the chapter *The Body as Expression and Speech*, mentions, Pure thought can be said to be a kind of emptiness of consciousness, an instantaneous desire. New meanings or intentions can only be recognized by including governable meanings, the results of activities previously expressed (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, p.239). Therefore, examining the construction of the body is essential for performing contemporary dance. This paper attempts to study the expression forms of contemporary dance through bodily expression, analyzing dancers' bodily experiences and the existential aspect of the body, exploring the cultural value of contemporary bodies, and expanding the understanding and experience of the body.

2. Background

Contemporary dance, as a unique art form known as Chinese modern dance, conveys historical culture and social realities through narrative performance styles, free from the constraints of traditional dance forms. It emphasizes the self-expression of dancers and cultural transmission. Originating from dance creation and performance in China after the 1950s, it integrates Western ballet into Chinese traditional culture. Influenced by the historical context and national culture of that time, contemporary Chinese dance themes were created and performed against the backdrop of local humanistic backgrounds. For example, in the 1950s, works like *Red Silk Dance* and *Lotus Dance*, along with the birth of *The Legend of the White Snake* in 1957, as China's first large-scale national dance drama, laid a profound foundation for the development of contemporary Chinese dance. Subsequent works such as *Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl*, created in the 1960s, expressed national spirit and traditional culture. Professor Wu Xiaobang, a Chinese performing artist, first proposed the concept of new dance, which was later renamed contemporary dance by the Chinese Dance Lotus Award in 1998(Wu, 1982).

His definition of new dance distinguishes it from the orthodox court music of feudal times and from the celebratory dances of ethnic festivals. The new aspect is grounded in adapting to the aesthetic preferences of the Chinese people. Its most essential feature is the spirit of realism, which, from a humanistic perspective, exposes various issues in the objective world and

expresses humanistic thoughts through authentic performance. It aims to use bodily expression to convey the sufferings, struggles, joys, and passions faced by humanity in this world (Li, 2021). Since the emergence of contemporary dance from the West in China in the 1980s, after over thirty years of development, contemporary dance has increasingly shown characteristics such as contemporaneity, diversity, independence, and innovation, gradually evolving into what is now known as Chinese contemporary dance. Waldenfels points out that as we attempt to clarify the relationship between the expressive body and the lived mental life—that is, the relationship between actual expression and what is to be expressed—we seemingly find ourselves confronted with a dilemma (2000). Descartes delved deeply into the relationship between the body and mind. Despite being more renowned for his philosophy of dualism, his studies on the body often focused on the interaction with emotions. In his work, he mentioned, "It is by the movements of our passions that our body prepares us to act; and it is the use of these movements that constitutes the proper effect of each passion." (1989). He explored how emotions are manifested through the body and drive human behavior. This differs from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, which emphasizes the direct connection between bodily experience and the world, as well as the body as the field of subjective experience. This perspective holds more research value for the bodily experience in contemporary dance. From this theoretical standpoint, this study aims to highlight that the development of Chinese contemporary dance is not only an innovation in artistic form but also a profound exploration of humanity, the body, and existence. Dance, as a unique form of bodily language, not only transcends linguistic and cultural barriers to engage in direct and profound communication but also serves as a tool for reflection and critique, challenging and expanding our understanding of the body, art, and life. In this process, dancers, choreographers, and audiences can all become participants in this exploration and dialogue, collectively experiencing and shaping the diversity and profundity of contemporary dance. This provides rich practical cases for studying the body as a medium of existence and expression, deepening our understanding of the body, self-awareness, and its role in culture and society. At the same time, it offers new theoretical and practical perspectives for dance performance education.

3. Problem Statements

Undoubtedly, contemporary dance stands as a distinctive Western dance within the current landscape of China, blending elements of ethnicity, history, Western modern dance, and ballet, thus becoming an indispensable part of China's dance performance repertoire. Within the historical context of China, contemporary dance "initially entered the public eye with an aesthetic of non-restrictive form, gradually incorporating diverse artistic paradigms of temporality and existence as artists continually explored the meaning of dance, integrating insights from life experiences. From the initial non-restrictive form emphasizing image shaping and the expression of popular aesthetics, contemporary dance in China has evolved into a mainstream consciousness of artistic creation, embracing multifaceted paradigms of temporality and existence (Li, 2021). While Chinese contemporary dance has developed considerably, possessing its own narrative and body expression, it remains influenced by mainstream aesthetics, resulting in a loss of a certain understanding of the body itself within contemporary dance. The focus has shifted

towards shaping what is termed as the character image. It appears that in contemporary dance, imitation and reproduction have become the social aesthetic of the body. In the construction of identity, it lacks intrinsic communication with culture and overlooks the experiential connection between physical expression, culture, and emotion. However, in this chapter on the body as expression and speech, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the experience of communication may be an illusion created by consciousness – in someone's view, a rationale for attributing the same thought realization to another conscious language machine. Yet, in reality, nothing is truly transmitted from one consciousness to another (1968). In Merleau-Ponty's perspective, art serves as a means for us to comprehend ourselves. The essence of art lies not in merely sustaining our daily existence but in encouraging us to engage in aesthetic contemplation of life. Art, particularly dance, transcends being just a physical skill or the pursuit of beauty; it delves into the depths of human existence and experience.

This experience surpasses the constraints of language, offering a more primal and direct mode of communication through the intuitive perception and expression of the body. In the evolution of Chinese contemporary dance, the application of this theory is notably crucial and pressing. Amid the reinforcement and standardization of mainstream aesthetic ideologies, the embodiment of dance becomes confined within a predetermined structure and external aesthetic quest, disregarding the intrinsic value and multiplicity of dance as a fundamental form of human expression.

4. Materials and methods

This study focuses on the embodiment and identity formation in contemporary dance, using the Chinese production *The Radio Waves of the Eternal Wave* as a primary case study. Produced by the Shanghai Song and Dance Troupe in 2018, the production premiered at the Shanghai International Dance Center in May 2019. Set in wartime Shanghai, the narrative centers around the heroic deeds of Martyr Li Bai, a member of the Communist Party of China and an underground liaison, depicting the clandestine struggle between Communist Party members and the Kuomintang secret service. By portraying the archetypal image of a Southern Yangtze River woman, the production authentically narrates the history of the Republic of China, embodying a quintessential contemporary dance drama.

Furthermore, to explore the interaction between the body and the environment in contemporary dance, this paper examines the Chinese Environmental Dance project sponsored by the China Dance Association in 2018. Representing China's inaugural engagement with diverse societal groups, this series of professional dance performances—conducted in various non-traditional theater settings—has been staged six times to date. Incorporating diverse dance forms such as classical, contemporary, and folk dance, performers adapt their routines to suit the unique characteristics of each venue, articulating societal aspirations while engaging with a global audience. Unlike conventional theatrical dance, this performance format imposes fewer constraints on the body, granting dancers and audiences greater freedom to embody corporeal sensations and engage in dialogue.

5. Literature review

As an art form, the theme of body expression and existence in Chinese contemporary dance holds a unique research position within the realms of dance studies and phenomenology. Initially influenced by Western dance theories and integrated into the cultural context of China, Chinese contemporary dance has developed its own modes of expression and philosophical implications after incorporating traditional elements and modern technology (Yu, 2022). In the exploration of the body, phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty provides an initial elucidation in his examination of the body as the perceiving subject. He posits that the body serves not only as the primary medium for self-experience and interpersonal communication, but also as the locus where subjective and objective worlds intersect (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962). Merleau-Ponty's framework offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the body expression in Chinese contemporary dance. Within this framework, the dancer's body is conceived as a site where consciousness interacts with the world, transcending mere physicality (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

Li Chen believes that in Chinese dance, dancers' bodies not only showcase technical skills through movements but also serve as vessels for emotions and thoughts. This expression goes beyond mere physical movement; at a deeper level, it embodies virtues. Each movement and posture in dance can be seen as a manifestation of the dancer's inner virtues. For instance, the fluidity, strength, and rhythm of dance can reflect the dancer's inner qualities. Furthermore, the text also discusses Confucius's views on the relationship between self and the body, providing a philosophical basis for understanding how the body becomes a tool for self-expression in contemporary dance. According to Confucius, the body is not controlled by the self but possesses the self, challenging traditional subject-object relationships and emphasizing the agency and primacy of the body in shaping personal identity and engaging in self-expression (Li, 2023, p. 73).

In Xu Hang's article *Self-Consciousness of Subjectivity in Dance Body Expression*, the author delves into the subjectivity of body expression in modern dance, emphasizing that dance is not merely a showcase of physical skills but also a reflection of the dancer's personal subjectivity and a significant mode of self-expression (Xu, 2014). He particularly focuses on how dance can be used to express the dancer's individual identity and emotions, challenging traditional visual power dynamics, and exploring ways to achieve liberation of the body and aesthetics in dance creation.

In Sun Jie's analysis of body expression, there is a focus on examining the relationship between body expression and language. Sun contends that language is not merely a tool for expressing thoughts but also intimately connected with bodily actions, serving as a mode of existence. He emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the body and language, revealing that the body is not only the agent of action but also a medium for perception and expression. This is directly relevant to the utilization of the dancer's body in contemporary dance, where dancers convey complex emotions and narratives through bodily language, embodying Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as the incarnation of some kind of behavior (Sun, 2015). Research on body expression and existence in Chinese contemporary dance indicates that dance is not only a form of artistic expression but also profoundly engages with individual existence and cultural experiences. As research delves deeper, this field gradually explores various aspects of body expression, such as

the interaction between the body and technology, the existence of the body in virtual spaces, and the body as a tool for individual existence and rights.

The body as the expression of subjectivity

In dance, our bodies serve not only as vessels for movement but also as mediums through which dancer express emotions and existence. Through movement, we perceive and understand ourselves, thereby endowing our bodies with expressive and communicative capabilities. Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is the fundamental means through which humans experience and understand the world, emphasizing that the body and consciousness are not separate entities but inseparable wholes (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962). This is particularly evident in the performing arts of dance, where dancers convey emotions, thoughts, and perceptions of the world through their bodies. Each movement of the body is not just a display of physical activity but also an externalization of inner feelings and mental states. The body exists within our minds but precedes the mind; it relies on our personal experiences in society and our perceptions of the world to develop a rich language and expressiveness. Furthermore, the body in dance serves as a bridge for communication with the world, reflecting a concern for ontology within dance (Xu, 2014). Dancers' bodies not only exist in performance but also continuously interact with the perceptions of the audience, the cultural background, and the history of dance itself. This interaction constitutes the existential nature of dance, making it not only an artistic expression but also a way of existence and experience. Through analyzing the body as a medium of expression and existence, we can better understand the depth and complexity of Chinese contemporary dance art and gain insights into the universal significance of the body in modern human life, as well as how the body can be used to understand and experience the world.

Dance body: the existence of subjectivity

The significance of dance in reflecting life lies in the establishment of human subjectivity and the continuous reinforcement of the concept of human in terms of expressing consciousness and the meaning of bodily existence. In our perception, the body carries every aspect of life, and from a single movement, one can discern a person's habits and even character. It gives us meaning in both existence and artistic expression in this world. According to Levin, the full realisation of our humanity, fully understanding experiential being as bodies, is attainable only through sentient and sensuous existence: through the culturally formed the social body and prepersonal body(Levin, 1983).The expression of dance undoubtedly serves as a poignant form of performance art, with our perception of the world and our emotions towards others based on the movements of our bodies, thereby conveying our goodwill towards the world. For dancers, the body is not merely a tool for showcasing professional abilities, but also a dialogue engaged in face-to-face communication and transmission with the world, culture, and society. In dance, the body serves as the primary medium, acting as a bridge connecting the self with the external world. Dancers explore their inner sensations through the body and translate them into external expressions. Merleau-Ponty proposed in his phenomenology that the body is the center surrounded by the world, through which we perceive the world and express our intentions and emotions. Dancers convey complex emotions and narratives through bodily language, including the fluidity, intensity, speed, and rhythm of movements. So, how does the body exist in this world and form the foundation for our dialogue with the world? In addressing this issue,

explanations have been provided in the study of bodily phenomenology: “One reason why the bodily aspect of existence plays an important role in communication lies in the fact that the body has its own knowledge of the world; it has its own awareness and intentionality, its own abilities and skills”(Tiemersma, 1982, p. 236).

In the realm of Chinese contemporary dance performance, the body becomes a canvas where dancers delve into self-exploration and storytelling. Each movement and expression articulate the emotions embedded within the narrative, with even the rhythm of breath serving as punctuation. During the act of performance, control over bodily movements eludes the grasp of the body, brain, and consciousness. Instead, a dynamic relationship is established with the body through the interplay of our senses—perception, smell, touch, and more—rendering it a conduit of bodily agency (Parviainen, 1998). For instance, from the moment a new life is born, and even within the mother's womb, the infant establishes its initial connection with the outside world through movements like kicking and stretching. These activities not only affirm the existence of life but also impart unique personalized significance to the infant's relationship with the mother. In the realm of dance, this dynamism is further accentuated and showcased. In contemporary dance, the body adapts its existence according to different environments and surroundings, thereby becoming a means for us to explore and communicate with the world. Through the body's movements, space is defined and shaped, while elements such as rhythm, speed, and pauses in dance serve as tools for dancers to explore and express dimensions of time. This realization embodies the subjectivity of the dancing body, rather than relying on mechanical muscle memory to perform bodily movements. The more we perceive movement as a function of muscles, the less we may realize the connection between sensation, movement, and these visible images. This is because our bodies exist within this dimension of time, expressing not just mere physical existence, but rather embodying the subject of the body, carrying our past, experiences, and memories of traversing through the history of this world (Parviainen, 1998, p.35). When our bodies experience and perceive the world, the physical movement is imbued with the essence of survival. In contemporary dance, the subjectivity of the body is a core concept, signifying that bodily actions are not driven by external forces, but rather stem from the dancer's inner motivations and sensations. When creating movements, dancers draw upon their own experiences and emotional states. Such movements reflect the dancer's personality and emotions more vividly, rendering the body an intentional expression of the subject.

The bodily expression in Chinese contemporary dance

The essence of contemporary dance lies in conveying authentic feelings to people, primarily through the embodiment of truth in both the body's origin and expression. This truth encompasses three aspects: firstly, the authenticity of the individual (subject); secondly, the authenticity of life and emotions (object); and thirdly, the authenticity of the body (vehicle). Contemporary dance emphasizes the authenticity of the individual, namely the authenticity of the subject (Li, 2023). In the performer's portrayal, the authentic experiences and emotions of the individual are indispensable elements. Through deep exploration and expression of their own emotions, the body transcends being merely an object in the world, no longer confined by a separate spiritual authority. It stands on the side of the subject; it represents our perspective on the world, embodying certain physical and historical conditions of the mind. The body is not merely a tool

or means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. This paper analyzes the interactivity among actors and the body, the body and the environment, and the body and the audience, through the contemporary dance's manipulation of time, space, and intensity, to explore the expressive intent of the triad, enabling the audience and performers to more intuitively perceive the authenticity of the body.

Unity of Body Perception and Movement Expression

In Merleau-Ponty's view, art is one of the ways for us to understand ourselves. In dance, bodily perception refers to the dancer's sensations and experiences of the internal and external environment, while movement expression involves conveying emotions, intentions, and themes through bodily movements perceived by bodily sensations. Merleau-Ponty believes that the body has a field of perception even before we have viewpoints, so we are destined to be connected with the world. In dance, the body serves not only as a physical entity in motion but also as an intermediary for dancers to perceive the world and express internal states. During movement, we can perceive the trajectory of motion through the brain and describe the sensations of the body during movement through perception. Although normal individuals have similar perceptual structures, synesthetic experiences enable us to have different perceptual abilities. Our perception relies on the use of synesthesia, which helps us penetrate each other's sensory perceptions in the process of appreciating and creating art, resulting in sensory stimuli triggering experiences of other sensations (Parviainen, 1998), this function is particularly important in dance. For example, when we taste sour grapes, the sourness stimulates our taste buds while simultaneously evoking associations with certain plants. Alternatively, through the smell of grapes, we can describe a season or an inner feeling. We may also incorporate this sour taste into natural bodily reactions. This demonstrates the body's ability to perceive taste using our senses of smell, taste, hearing, and sight. Similar to other arts, synesthesia plays a core role in dancers' perceptual abilities in dance. In contemporary dance, dancers often translate environmental sounds and visual cues from daily life into bodily expressions, enhancing their immersion in the dance experience and the realism of the scene. When dancers' bodily perception transcends the physical senses, it delves deeper into the more fundamental realm of interaction between the individual and the environment (Liu, 2022). For experiences they haven't encountered, how dancers vividly portray stories, characters, and emotions in a way that is concrete and authentic becomes a test of their perceptual abilities.

In the dance drama *The Eternal Wave of Radio Waves*, the *Fishing Light Song* depicts the authentic life scenes of Jiangnan women during the Republic of China era in Shanghai. In the choreography of this dance segment, actions such as burning firewood, fanning, and gracefully strolling through the alleys require dancers to not only challenge realism but also experience emotions and life experiences they may never have encountered. To embody the essence of the performance in their bodies, the imitation of characters and the historical context goes beyond mere physical representation. Actors must infuse their observations of Jiangnan women's daily lives into their movements. This perception is authentic and goes beyond mere imitation of actions.

In Figure 1a, one can perceive the elegance and gracefulness in the actors' movements. The dancers' body postures appear supple yet powerful, showcasing a high sensitivity to every joint,

muscle, and breath—a hallmark of contemporary dance control and awareness. Particularly noticeable in seated actors is a sense of inward concentration. Transforming perceptual movements into muscle control and manifesting a sense of lightness in their bodies, dancers' body postures also convey certain emotional states. Perception of body postures may be a key factor in interpreting others' emotional states, akin to facial expressions. Therefore, similar to facial expressions, perceptual feedback from bodily movements can elicit different emotional states and significantly influence the perception of emotional stimuli, such as emotional body postures and facial expressions (Duclos et al., 1989). In Figure 1b, the mutual perception of bodies is the foundation of movement construction among dancers. Each actor's perception of synesthesia needs to be unified. However, a complete dance pattern requires dancers to engage in non-verbal communication through perception and mutual bodily awareness. As the pivot points of bodies touch in space, it signifies not only physical connection but also a dialogue of perception. In such encounters, dancers must sensitively perceive the intentions of each other's movements. The initiation and reception of movements require precise perceptual matching to maintain overall fluency and unity, thereby reinforcing the stylistic essence of Jiangnan in the choreography. In contemporary dance, the expression of movements demonstrates dancers' profound understanding and utilization of their bodily abilities from the perspectives of bodily perception and feedback.



Figure 1a



Figure 1b:

Source: *The Eternal Wave of Radio Waves*, Act II, Fishing Light Song

Performed by Shanghai Song and Dance Troupe Photo by Xufeng Wang, 2018

Whether in solitary introspection or in the responsive dynamics of dancing with others, both dancers and audience members need to constantly perceive each other's bodily changes and respond appropriately. However, when we engage in typical dance theater performances, we often carry too many preconceived notions, which may inadvertently obscure the bodily expression and sensations present, leading us to frequently overlook the visible capabilities of the body. Conversely, as dancers, we should comprehend movement's rhythms in space and time through bodily perception. When the body can genuinely convey the meaning of dance through

sensory experiences, the significance of bodily presence can convey feelings and meanings through the body.

Body and Environmental Interaction

Merleau-Ponty posited that the human body is not a separate, objective entity from the environment but rather a subject that interacts with the environment through perception and action. He emphasized the notion of embodiment, suggesting that the body serves as a medium and pathway for our existence in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). The interactivity between the environment and dance advocates for the exchange and permeation of various environmental factors in a three-dimensional space, where dancers and audiences reciprocate and receive within specific organized spaces. Here, the environment is not defined as any particular type of stage; rather, it serves as a bridge for expressing the body, creating an artistic space where the dancer's body interacts with the world. Dancers perceive their bodies and convey emotions within the given space. Understanding the specific environment in which dancers find themselves from a spatial perspective entails an open and liberating concept, suggesting the potential for bodily activity within it. Through the dancer's control of time, space, and the intensity of movement, an inherent connection between the dance body and the environment is established. Time and space are reconfigured as discussions of subjective movement/dance bodies, extending and expressing themselves in time and space. This reconfiguration is the result of any experience as a dancer; when the subjective feeling of self in motion is unified relationally through temporal and spatial awareness, the form of dance is fully realized (Dority, 2020).

In contemporary dance art, dancers and choreographers attempt to break away from traditional theatrical models, allowing performers and audiences to participate together in the performance. This close interaction enables the audience to observe the dancers' body movements up close and personally experience the emotions conveyed by the real bodies. It allows spectators to use their senses to perceive the dancers' movements in time and space; the sounds of motion; the physical exhaustion of the dancers; the sensation of the body touching the ground; the flow of air around the dancers; and the sense of distance between individuals. The process of experiencing dance in time and space involves the cognitive subject's perception, cognition, and judgment of dance time and space. This process is grounded in embodied bodies, inherent to the phenomenological body, occurring within the phenomenological space, accompanied by the generation of meaning (Sun & Jiang, 2014).

In 2018, the China Dance Association held the first environmental dance performance integrating dance with nature (Figure 2a & Figure 2b). Over the past five years, this event has accumulated valuable experience, focusing on creative development and performances centered around the integration of dance with architecture, nature, urban environments, and other environmental factors. The contemporary dance performance *Rings of Time* was staged in an industrial park, with dancers standing on a symbolic red gyroscope representing time, adorned in mottled attire with white towels around their necks. Sculptural in form, the dancers used their bodies to support a slanted wall, symbolizing the indomitable spirit of steel, echoing the environment of a cement factory. This environment signifies the creation of an imaginative space through the emotional performances of the actors within a representational space. The choreography expresses attitudes towards time and life, utilizing the environment and the body to evoke contemplation of the

world. Contemporary dance is attempting to break away from the confines of conventional theatrical environments, allowing the body to be placed in richer and more immersive multidimensional spaces. By leveraging the characteristics of different environments, it stimulates the imagination of both the audience and the dancers, liberating the body and thoughts within open and free spaces. The improvisational and spontaneous bodily expressions are characteristic of contemporary dance in non-traditional environments.

Dancers focus more on experiencing the body as a subjective consciousness rather than mere physical performance. It tests the dancers' adaptability and responsiveness; for instance, a low-flying bird in the city or a sudden interruption by a passing child are objective factors that influence the performance. However, it is precisely these factors that create possibilities for the dancer's body and become part of our subjective performance, enriching the challenges we face with our bodies. In dance, dancers interact with the stage environment and situation through their bodies, jointly constructing the meaning and emotions of the dance piece.



Figure 2a



Figure 2b

Figure 2a Source: Photo by Han Xuan. Performer: Beijing Dance Academy, 2019

Figure 2b Source: Annual Ring, Photo by Han Xuan. Performer, Central University for Nationalities School of Dance, 2019

Every aspect of nature serves as a stage for expressing the body. Dancers, through improvisation or choreographed performances, demonstrate their perception and awareness of the environment, nature, or urban spaces. This allows audiences to change rigid visual effects and reexamine our living environment, continuously exploring the dance cultural forms that reflect the relationship between humans, cities, and natural environments. They persistently explore the expressive forms and symbolic spaces of contemporary dance art.

Construction of Cultural Identity through Contemporary Dance Body

The culture of contemporary dance is characterized by diversity and openness, reflecting cultural phenomena and modes of thought. In the shaping of dance imagery, it is not merely the presentation of roles but also the construction and exploration of cultural identity. Dancers, through their performances, exhibit their cultural background, social status, and personal

experiences, thereby presenting a specific cultural identity. This construction of cultural identity is influenced not only by personal emotions and experiences but also by the socio-cultural environment and historical context. Cultural connotation is the soul of dance; it not only infuses dance with charm and color but also conveys a sense of spiritual taste. Dance is closely related to culture. It is a part of culture and serves as a transmitter of culture. Dance plays a significant role in promoting culture. It is also a cultural carrier, shaped by its cultural context (Mu, 2018). Through bodily expression, dancers showcase their cultural traditions and identity, integrating personal experiences and collective memories into their performances. This bodily expression is not only a presentation of individual identity but also a transmission and reenactment of history and culture. By analyzing dance imagery, we can explore the construction of dancers' self-identity and cultural identity. This construction of cultural identity not only enriches the expressive means and effects of dance art but also offers audiences profound reflections and experiences of cultural recognition and historical memory.

The Body as a Carrier of Cultural Identity and Historical Memory

The culture of a community, as well as the personal experiences of dancers, are imprinted and displayed in dance movements. In the social construction of the human body, cultural values are embodied and become part of the dancer's physical expression. Dance is intricately connected to culture and the body in areas such as communication, social hierarchy, social values, relationships between individuals and groups, and gender relations (Byczkowska-Owczarek, 2020). Contemporary dance holds a unique role in the Chinese art scene, serving not only as a form of modern artistic expression but also as a powerful medium for transmitting culture and history. In exploring how contemporary dance shapes imagery, it is essential to understand how it employs body language, stage design, and choreography to manifest the rich Chinese artistic culture and historical philosophy.

Shaping Imagery: The Representation of Cultural Identity

The initial purpose of shaping imagery in dance is to visually convey the performance's intent and story structure to the audience. However, the ultimate significance of a dancer's bodily expression lies in the representation of cultural identity, allowing the audience to understand the historical and personal context of the characters as well as the cultural implications of the contemporary social background (Wang & Chen, 2015). Contemporary dance, through precise control and expression of the dancer's body, can create culturally symbolic imagery rich in meaning. These images, through the clever use of costumes, props, and choreography, bring historical culture to life on the modern stage. For example, in the work figure3, dancers use everyday items from the Republic of China era, such as bamboo fans and stools, as well as traditional clothing like Han dynasty's clothes and qipao. These not only provide the audience with visual cultural markers but also, through their modern reinterpretation, allow the audience to feel the continuity and contemporary relevance of traditional culture. Every detail in the choreography, from the form of gestures and body postures to interactions with music, is deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural context. These movements are not merely displays of dance technique; they are storytellers of culture, conveying profound cultural meanings through non-verbal means.



Figure 3

Source: *The Eternal Wave of Radio Waves*, Act II, Fishing Light Song.

Performed by Shanghai Song and Dance Troupe. Photo by Xufeng Wang, 2018

Narrative Structure: The Weaving of History

The narrative structure of contemporary dance is often multi-layered, combining both narrative and abstract elements to weave together segments of history or legend through coherent dance movements. Dancers use the dynamic changes in their bodies to traverse the timeline, embedding fragments of history into the modern audience's perception. This storytelling method is not just about narrating a story but also about exploring and reflecting on the impact of historical events and their significance in contemporary society (Ma, 2015).

For instance, in the figure 4a and 4b , the meticulously designed dance narrative recreates the radio communication work during the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan, showcasing the heroic deeds of the underground workers of the Chinese Communist Party. Through the dancers' body language and dynamic choreography, the piece reconstructs the external experiences of historical events and delves into the inner world and collective spirit of people in the extreme conditions of the Republican era. The emotional fluctuations and shifts in power within the dance accurately convey the urgency and tension of the historical events, while also reflecting the persistence and indomitable spirit of people amidst suffering. This work is not only an artistic reenactment of history but also a profound reflection on humanity and collective memory during that historical period. By utilizing such a narrative structure, the dance draws the audience into a historical narrative that is both concrete and abstract, enabling them to understand and feel the profound impact of history through sensory experience. Such dance works typically require the audience to have some historical and cultural background knowledge to fully grasp the deeper

meanings embedded in the dance. Through watching these performances, the audience gains a more vivid understanding of history and can make deeper reflections on current social phenomena. This dual dialogue between history and reality is a significant innovation in the narrative structure of contemporary dance and underscores its importance as a cultural and historical medium.



Figure 4a



Figure 4b

Source: *The Eternal Wave of Radio Waves*, Act I, Farewell.

Performed by Jiejing Zhu & Jiajun Wang. Photo by Xufeng Wang, 2018

The Cultural Value of Bodily Expression

Contemporary dance serves not only as an art form showcasing the beauty of bodily movement but also as a vehicle for cultural transmission, expressing the fusion of traditional and modern cultural values through the bodies of the dancers. It explores how contemporary dance finds its unique cultural position between traditional culture and modern aesthetics, serving as a cultural bridge to convey its profound cultural value to society and the world. When the body becomes the subject of culture and a dialogue partner with the world, it is not just a tool of performance but also a cultural symbol with subjectivity. As Susan Leigh Foster describes in her work, the dancing body is a conscious body, with its movements not only showcasing skill but also directly embodying cultural and social significance (Foster, 2010).

Contemporary dance, through the language of bodily movements, showcases a cultural transformation from tradition to modernity, including both respect for traditional culture and absorption and reflection on modern cultural trends. In the creation and performance of contemporary dance, dancers often combine traditional elements with modern expressive techniques to explore and present the continuity and innovation of culture. For example, integrating traditional Chinese martial arts movements into the choreography of modern dance not only displays the power and beauty of martial arts movements but also revitalizes these traditional art forms in the context of globalized culture. This blending reflects contemporary dance's respect for traditional cultural values and its reinterpretation and dissemination in modern society. As one of the conveyors of culture, dance art has a particularly significant social impact in the context of globalization. Through international stages, contemporary dance not only

conveys China's cultural characteristics to the world but also promotes cross-cultural understanding and communication. As Mark Franko pointed out in his discussion of modern dance, dance, as a cross-cultural form of expression, can build bridges between different cultures, promoting mutual understanding and integration of global cultures (Franko, 1995). Contemporary dance, through its unique dance body, conveys a positive cultural attitude, that is, respecting tradition while daring to innovate. This attitude not only conforms to modern society's respect for and acceptance of multiculturalism but also provides new possibilities for the dissemination and development of traditional culture in modern society.

6. Conclusion

In contemporary Chinese dance, the expression of the body transcends simple movements and postures; it becomes a manifestation of a unique way of being and experiencing existence. Through the dancer's body, we not only see the external expressions of emotions and inner experiences but also experience the profound significance of the body as a way of being. The body in dance is no longer just an object of objective existence but a subjective presence. Through dance, dancers not only express themselves but also experience the existence of the self within the body. This subjectivity of the body is not only reflected at the individual level of the dancer but also reflects the body concept and identity recognition of traditional Chinese culture and modern society. In this process, the body is not just a medium but also a symbol, a carrier of meaning and values.

However, with the intensification of social change and cultural conflict, dancers face the dilemma of identity recognition in their body expressions. How to find a balance between traditional culture and modern society has become a question that dance artists need to seriously consider. At the same time, excessive emphasis on form and technique may lead to the loss of authenticity and depth in works. Dance art should focus on the authenticity of emotional expression, not just on the form. Moreover, more attention should be paid to the individual bodily experiences and emotional expressions of dancers, making dance works more resonant and profound, leading the audience to think and reflect.

This article hopes that through the study of body expression, we can better understand and respect the ways and meanings of body expression in different cultural backgrounds, promoting communication and understanding between different cultures. Finally, this research also helps us to re-examine the relationship between the body and existence. The body is not only the way we exist in the world but also the medium through which we interact and experience the world. Through dance, this unique way of existence, we can better understand the relationship between the self and the world and the role the body plays in this relationship. This not only helps us better understand the nature of human existence but also provides us with a perspective to re-examine the meaning of existence and the experience of life.

WORKS CITED

- Bannerman, H. (2010). Martha Graham's House of the Pelvic Truth: The Figuration of Sexual Identities and Female Empowerment. *Dance Research Journal*, 42(1), 30-45.
- Dority, K. (2020). *Dancing Across Difference: Transforming Habitual Modes of Being in the World Through Movement* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Western Ontario (Canada)).
- Duclos, S. E., Laird, J. D., Schneider, E., Sexter, M., Stern, L., & Van Lighten, O. (1989). Emotion-specific effects of facial expressions and postures on emotional experience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(1), 100.
- Descartes, R. (1989). *Passions of the Soul*. Hackett Publishing.
- Levin, D. M. (1983). Philosophers and the Dance. What is dance, 85-94.
- Li, C. (2023). Being Possessed by the Body: A Preliminary Exploration of the Virtuous Body in Confucius' Eyes. *Journal of Confucian Studies*, (1), 63-83.
- Luo, Z. (2022). The Expressivity of the Body and Its Formalism: A Phenomenological Perspective. *World Philosophy*, 09(1),95-102
- Li, J. (2021). The Origin and Development of "Contemporary Dance" in China. *Yuehai Feng*, 4, 104-108. DOI: 10.16591/j.cnki.44-1332/i.2021.04.019.
- Liu, X. (2022). Research on the Dance Body Expression from Momentum to Movement. *Art Appraisal*, 22, 9-12.
- Mu, Y. (2018). Cultural Identity Recognition and Cultural Confidence in Chinese Dance. *Art Broad View*, 1, 71-79.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., & Smith, C. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (Vol. 26). Routledge London.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The Visible and the Invisible*. Northwestern University Press.
- Parviainen, J. (1998). *Bodies moving and moved: A phenomenological analysis of the dancing subject and the cognitive and ethical values of dance art*. Tampere University Press.
- Ravn, S. (2008). Sensing Movement, Living Spaces: An Investigation of Movement Based on the Lived Experience of 13 Professional Dancers. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 3(1), 14-35.
- Sun, J. (2015). Research on the Language of 'Bodily Expression' from Merleau-Ponty's Perspective. *Journal of MangZhong*, (06), 15-16.
- Sun, C., & Jiang, J. (2014). Dialogue between Body and Space: Starting from the Return Consciousness of Antony Gormley's Installation. *Art Observation*, 4, 145-147.
- Tiemersma, D. (1982). 'Body-image' and 'Body-schema' in the Existential Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 13(3),
- Wang, Y., & Chen, L. (2015). Modern Dance in Contemporary China: An Artistic and Cultural Phenomenon. *Dance Research Journal*, 47(2), 63-80.
- Wang, X. (2018). *Fishing Light Song* (Dance Performance. Shanghai, China).
- Wu, X.1982. *Introduction to New Dance*.China Drama Press.
- Waldenfels, B. (2000). The Paradox of Expression. In F. Evans & L. Lawlor (Eds.), *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh* (pp. 89-102). Suny Press.
- Xu, H. (2014).The "Subjectivity"Consciousness in Dance Body Expression,*Journal of Beijing Dance Academy*,(03),48-51
- Xuan, H. (2019). *Annual Ring* (Dance Performance), Central University for Nationalities School of Dance, Beijing, China, 2019.
- Yu, P. (2022). Dance Studies from the Perspective of the Modern Art System: Starting from Wu Xiaobang's "New Dance Art". *Art Research*,05, 49-59.