

From Form to Meaning: Contemporary Expression and Aesthetic Implication of Traditional Dance Elements

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Abstract: "From form to meaning" is both the spiritual pulse of Chinese art and the aesthetic path for traditional dance elements toward contemporary expression. This paper takes "form" and "meaning" in traditional dance as core categories to explore their way of regeneration in contemporary dance creation. The "form" of traditional dance contains stylized bodily logic and the rhythmic beauty of national culture; meanwhile, "meaning" is the spiritual imagery and emotional charm revealed through bodily perception. With the introduction of modern dance trends, "form" in dance is no longer a static symbol but becomes a medium for the generation of "meaning". This paper analyzes the contemporary expression strategies of traditional dance elements from three levels: the abstraction of movement structure, the symbolization of imagery expression, and the aesthetic reconstruction of bodily perception. It points out the dynamic relationship of being mutual surfaces and interiors, symbiosis, and resonance formed by "form" and "meaning" in contemporary creation. The study believes that the modern transformation of traditional dance elements should not stop at formal renewal, but should achieve the reappearance of cultural spirit and the contemporary rebirth of imagery through bodily perception and aesthetic generation.

Keywords: Form and Meaning, Traditional Dance Elements, Contemporary Expression

Introduction

The relationship between "form" and "meaning" almost runs through the entire intellectual lineage of Chinese art. From the Classic of Music saying emotion is stirred within and takes form in words, to Zong Baihua proposing "depicting spirit through form" and "depicting meaning through form," this aesthetic logic always reveals the spiritual orientation of Chinese art moving from technique to Dao and manifesting meaning through form. Dance, as the most direct art form using the body as a medium, becomes the most vivid existence of the interweaving of form and meaning with its dynamic rhythm and flow of qiyun. It conveys emotion through the form of movement and manifests spirit through the motion of qiyun, making the body a field for the generation of imagery. However, the author finds that in the actual process of contemporary creation, choreographers often face a dilemma when facing tradition: on the one hand, the reuse of traditional dance elements is the ultimate creative resource in the process of modern choreographers' creation; on the other hand, this "reuse" often briefly stays at the reproduction of forms and the collage of symbols, failing to truly touch the generation of "meaning" behind it. If the citation of traditional elements in contemporary dance creation is limited to the replication of formula and costuming, it is easy to fall into the superficial polyphony of "form" while ignoring the deep logic of "depicting spirit through form and conveying

meaning through motion" in traditional dance. How to make "form" a medium for "meaning" rather than its shackle has become a subject that current dance creators must face.

Behind this problem, in fact, lies the root proposition of the Chinese artistic spirit. Zong Baihua once said that "dance" is the model of all artistic realms in China, embodying "generative rhythm" and the cosmic consciousness of "governing space with time". It can be seen that the "form" of dance is never isolated from the pursuit of formal beauty, but is the manifestation of "the flow of vital energy" and the concretization of the rhythm of life. Every rotation and pause of a dancer is the echo of the rhythm of "qi" in space. If the beauty of "form" lacks the inner content of "meaning," dance only stops at the stacking of skills; conversely, if "meaning" is not born relying on "form," it is also difficult to concretely manifest its spiritual pulse. Therefore, the relationship between "form" and "meaning" is not two opposite poles, but a life process of being mutual substance and function, and being interdependent and intergenerating. Under the innovative context of contemporary dance, the reconstruction of the "form-meaning" relationship is not only an aesthetic return to traditional culture but also a rethinking of the way of bodily cognition. Modern dance trends introduce the concept of "de-formalization," making the dancer's body no longer subject to formula but becoming the subject of perception and expression. The contemporary expression of traditional dance elements should obtain rebirth in this open bodily consciousness—both continuing the rhythmic logic of the "form" of tradition and giving it new life tension with contemporary "meaning". In this way, the "form" of dance can be transformed into a dynamic spiritual language, and "meaning" can also be reconstructed in the flowing body.

What this paper explores is precisely this artistic self-awareness of "attaining meaning through form". By tracing the ideological basis of "form" and "meaning," revealing its archetypal structure in Chinese artistic thinking, and taking this concept as a reference, it examines the aesthetic generation of traditional dance elements in contemporary expression. Such exploration does not stay at the level of form and technique, but intends to explain: the value of traditional dance lies not in the reproduction of its external appearance, but in its continuous generation as cultural spirit. Thus, "from form to meaning" is not only a path of dance creation but also a conceptual dimension for reconstructing Eastern bodily aesthetics—letting traditional form become the breath of meaning; letting contemporary dance return to the origin of spirit.

1. "From Form to Meaning": The Intellectual Gene of Chinese Aesthetics

"From form to meaning" is not only a path of artistic creation but also a spiritual pulse running through the history of Chinese aesthetic thought. It reveals the internal mechanism of Chinese art moving from technique to Dao and from image into meaning, and also constitutes the philosophical prototype of traditional dance aesthetics. Viewed from the depth of philosophy, the source of this thought can be traced back to classical cultural traditions such as the I Ching, Classic of Music, Zhuangzi, and Zen; viewed from the horizontal perspective of aesthetics, it obtained systematic expression in the discussions of modern scholars and became an important category of the Chinese artistic spirit.

As early as the Pre-Qin period, the Classic of Music took "emotion is stirred within and takes form in words" as the starting point of its discussion, pointing out the interaction between "form" and "emotion". Here, "form" is not a simple external form, but the natural flow of emotion in the body and movements, and the sensory manifestation of "meaning". Later, "Dashing Life" in Zhuangzi proposed "joining the natural with the natural," advocating the fit between the movement of the body and the movement of the mind, making "dance" a rhythmic expression of life self-awareness. It can be said that "form" in ancient Chinese artistic concepts was never a physical body on the

material level, but a carrier of spirit and qiyun; while "meaning" is generated in this process of "the flow of vital energy," moving from the rhythm of the body to the imagery of the mind.

Entering the modern aesthetic context, Zong Baihua deepened this thought with his unique "dance" theory. He pointed out that the worldview of the I Ching is "one Yin and one Yang is called Dao," and all things are born from the qi of heaven and earth, and the flow of qi is the rhythm of life. The perceptible manifestation of this rhythm is "dance"—it is the visualization of the "generative way". Zong Baihua therefore believed: "Dance, this highest degree of rhythm and order, is simultaneously the highest degree of life and passion". In his view, "form" is the appearance of rhythm, and "meaning" is the generation of rhythm—the two are not separated from each other, but have a "substance and function" relationship of "containing stillness in motion" and "revealing spirit through form". This viewpoint provided a theoretical basis for understanding the internal logic of Chinese dance aesthetics: that is, the morphological movement of the body does not serve formal beauty, but conveys the meaning of the mind through the flow of qiyun.

The view of the body in the contemporary philosophical context gives a new explanatory path to this ancient proposition. Merleau-Ponty pointed out in *Phenomenology of Perception* that the body is not an object perceiving the world, but a field where meaning is generated. The form of the body generates meaning because of perception; the movements of dance obtain symbolic power because of the flow of bodily intentionality. This coincides with the ancient Chinese thoughts of "depicting spirit through form" and "both spirit and form being complete": the body is not a carrier, but a way of generating thought. Thus, the "form" of dance is not a simple external performance, but the concretization of spiritual activities; the "meaning" of dance is not an emotional vent of the heart, but the result of the joint action of bodily perception and cultural memory. The reason why traditional dance can transcend the times and be unceasing is precisely because it contains meaning in "form" and manifests form in "meaning".

The ideological basis of "from form to meaning" was thus established. It contains triple logic: first, "vital energy thinking" at the worldview level—replacing entities with flow and replacing static states with generation; second, "conveying meaning through form" at the art theory level—revealing the existence of spirit through the rhythm and structure of the body; third, "mutual reflection of spirit and form" at the aesthetic level—letting viewers realize the flow of meaning in perceiving form. This thought runs through various fields of Chinese art and is particularly vivid in dance. The form of dance never stops at modeling but is composed of the movement of "qi" and the circulation of "meaning"; the beauty of dance is not in the precision of external form, but in the internal breathing and charm. Just as Zong Baihua said: "The life of art lies in its rhythm". Form is the body of rhythm, and meaning is the soul of rhythm; the two are born together and manifest each other.

Therefore, "from form to meaning" is not only an artistic logic but also an aesthetic attitude. It allows us to no longer be limited to the imitation of form when facing tradition, but to use the body as a medium to re-experience the "movement of qiyun" within it. When the boundary of form is opened by the meaning of perception, the meaning of dance transcends the technical level and becomes a contemporary expression of cultural spirit. Thus, traditional dance elements are no longer restored historical symbols, but cultural energy that can be regenerated. In this sense, "from form to meaning" is a continuous movement of thought—both looking back at classical roots and pointing to modern creation; it is both an aesthetic proposition and the way of breathing between the body and culture.

2."Form" and "Meaning": Artistic Archetypes in Somatic Language

In the art of dance, the body serves not merely as a representational tool but as a primary site for the generation of meaning. The pursuit of "Form" (Xing) and "Meaning" (Yi) in traditional dance facilitates a spiritual sublimation from technique to essence via the somatic medium. Within classical Chinese aesthetics, the discourse on the "Form-Meaning" relationship is essentially a philosophical inquiry into the "Body-Spirit" duality. Revealing meaning through form and generating form through meaning constitute the internal circulation of Chinese art and the conceptual archetype upon which the aesthetic system of traditional dance is constructed. Consequently, the distinctiveness of Chinese art lies not in formal divergence but in its pervasive cognitive methodology: "depicting spirit through form and constructing realms through meaning."

Firstly, "Form" in traditional dance represents a codified somatic logic. It is not a collection of isolated poses but a "body method" (Shenfa) imbued with cultural cadences. From the "fluid elegance" of Han and Tang music-dance to the "subtle restraint" of the Song and Yuan dynasties, and the "strength within softness" of the Ming and Qing court dances, these morphologies embody the cultural ethos of "carrying the Dao through form." These "formulaic codes" (Chengshi) function as both kinetic paradigms and symbols of cultural memory; they encode ethnic somatic experiences into a system of rhythm and posture, externalizing the cultural spirit. Zong Baihua's concept of "generative rhythm" identifies the vital foundation of this somatic logic—wherein the rhythmic flow of the body during every breath, contraction, extension, and transition constitutes the morphological representation of life.

Secondly, "Meaning" in dance is not an abstract concept but a synthesis of perception and affect generated through somatic kinesis. Traditional aesthetics emphasize "depicting spirit through form" and the "unity of form and spirit," which essentially signifies the externalization of "Meaning" through sensory bodily action. The dancer's respiration, center of gravity, and rhythmic modulations serve as media for imagery. As Zhu Guangqian observed, "meaning resides beyond words, while spirit dwells within form"; thus, "Meaning" in dance flows incessantly within the dynamic generation of "Form." Somatic movement, therefore, transcends the mimesis of external objects to become a self-manifestation of internal Qiyun and spiritual rhythm. In other words, "Meaning" is not an appendage to "Form" but is experienced and created during the unfolding of "Form" itself.

Furthermore, from an artistic-genealogical perspective, the establishment of the "Form-Meaning" relationship defines a unique aesthetic paradigm for Chinese dance. Unlike Western ballet, which prioritizes spatial modeling and structural force, Chinese dance aesthetics focus on the "flow of momentum" (Shi) and the "connectivity of Qi." The sequence of initiation, development, transition, and resolution is not a mechanical shift but a continuous extension of internal vigor. Traditional theory posits that "form may break, but meaning remains connected" and "meaning leads the form," suggesting that the continuity of "Form" relies on the coherence of "Meaning," while "Meaning" requires the vessel of "Form" for its concrete realization. This relationship, described by Zong Baihua as "mutual rooting of motion and stillness, and reciprocal generation of void and solid," constitutes the most characteristically Eastern logic of expression.

Finally, the somatic language of dance is inherently an "imagistic" expression. Through symbolic postures, rhythms, and spatial trajectories, it reconstructs the relationship between the body and the cosmos. As Zong Baihua noted in his treatise on dance, the dancer's movements align with the laws of Yin and Yang; their rotations and inclinations mirror the rhythms of the universe. In this conceptual framework, every rise and fall of the body is more than an individual movement—it is a manifestation of the "flow of vital energy" and a resonance between life and cosmic rhythm. Thus, "Form" and "Meaning" in traditional dance are not static entities but vital cadences within a spatio-temporal flow, representing a state of communion between the individual body and the rhythm of nature.

In conclusion, "Form" and "Meaning" constitute the two poles of Chinese somatic language: the formal pole of cultural codification and the spiritual pole of fluid imagery. When the body attains perceptive awakening through rhythm, "Form" ceases to be a constraint and becomes the generative source of "Meaning." Within this interdependent and dynamic relationship, Chinese dance establishes its unique aesthetic archetype—traversing into the meaning of life through somatic form and manifesting spiritual imagery through rhythmic motion.

3.The Symbiosis of "Form" and "Meaning": Paths for the Contemporary Expression of Traditional Dance Elements

The core challenge of contemporary choreography lies not merely in "inheriting" tradition, but in "activating" it. Between external form and internal spirit exists an aesthetic passage leading from Xing (Form) to Yi (Meaning). Traditional dance elements endure across time because their "Form" is never a static symbol, but a dynamic structure open to perception and reinvention; similarly, their "Meaning" transcends classical semiotics to be regenerated within contemporary somatic awareness. By adopting a "Form-Meaning" symbiosis, we can redefine contemporary expression—not as an accumulation of forms, but as a resurgence of meaning; not as a mimesis of antiquity, but as a re-perception of life's rhythm.

3.1 Abstraction of Movement Structures: From Formula to Imagery

Codified formulae (Chengshi) in traditional dance are the crystallization of historical somatic experiences—the sedimentation of "Form." However, the direct application of these formulae in contemporary contexts often results in a loss of vitality, reducing them to fossilized symbols. Consequently, abstraction emerges as a vital strategy—a process of "de-reification" rather than mere distortion. By distilling structural elements such as rhythm, center of gravity, and respiration, choreographers transform concrete movement vocabularies into spiritually oriented morphologies. For instance, the "Azure-Green Body Method" in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* does not merely replicate Tang dynasty dance; rather, it adheres to the principle of "infusing dance with calligraphic intent." Through the circularity of the arms and the subtle inclination of the torso, it transforms "Form" into "Momentum" (Shi), which in turn generates "Meaning," recreating the aesthetic grandeur of landscape painting through abstract somatic contours. Thus, abstraction facilitates the regeneration of "Form"—revealing the deep rhythmic pulse of cultural spirit once the literal narrative is stripped away.

3.2 Symbolization of Imagery: From Narrative to Spirit

The transition from "Form" to "Meaning" is predicated on the potential for symbolic generation. The aesthetic core of traditional Chinese art, including dance, resides in "Imagery" (Yixiang). Symbolic expression allows movement to transcend singular narrative functions, becoming a vessel for concepts and affects. In assimilating traditional elements, contemporary dance establishes symbolic visual semantics through spatial composition, prop utilization, and ensemble configurations. For example, the dance drama *Confucius* employs ritualistic gestures such as "folded hands," "bowing," and "prostrating" as motifs. Through rhythmic variations, the physical form of "Ritual" (Li) is sublimated into the spirit of "Benevolence" (Ren). Similarly, in *Great Dream of Dunhuang*, the "caressing of sleeves" and "rotation of wrists" symbolize the awakening and flow of Buddhist nature, transforming the individual body into a metaphorical space for cultural belief. This symbolic path ensures that "Meaning" is no longer an appendage to external narration but an internal spiritual catalyst for the dance itself.

3.3 Aesthetic Reconstruction: Contemporary Manifestations of "Form-Meaning" Symbiosis

The ultimate goal of the "Form-Meaning" transition is to establish a novel aesthetic structure. In contemporary contexts, the revitalization of traditional elements signifies an aesthetic reconstruction of how beauty is perceived and how meaning is generated. This marks a shift from "somatic representation" to the "reconstruction of aesthetic experience," and from "formal imitation" to "meaningful resonance." The crux of contemporary expression lies in a dynamic equilibrium: without Form, Meaning lacks a vessel; without Meaning, Form loses its soul.

Firstly, this reconstruction is evident in the **redefinition of the spectator-performer relationship**. Traditional aesthetics often centered on a "gaze-based" model, maintaining a distance between the stage and the observer. Contemporary expression, however, emphasizes "synesthesia" and "presence"—the spectator becomes a participant in imagery-generation. In the work *Soul of Qin Terracotta Warriors*, the choreographer utilizes rhythmic shifts in lighting and ensemble breath to allow the audience to "perceive the motion of Form and realize the birth of Meaning" within a shared spatio-temporal field. This "resonant" aesthetics transforms "Form" and "Meaning" from a unidirectional transmission into a collaborative experiential process.

Secondly, it involves the **translation of cultural contexts and spiritual renewal**. While traditional "Meaning" is rooted in Confucian, Daoist, or Zen philosophies, contemporary dance re-activates these spirits within a globalized context, transforming classical imagery into modern emotional structures. For instance, *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* translates the "rhythmic vitality" of classical aesthetics into a contemporary visual perceptual structure; *The Rite of Spring: Classic of Mountains and Seas* converts the "Daoist" worldview of "Nature's Way" into a contemporary philosophical inquiry on life's resonance through primal physical power.

Finally, the core of this reconstruction is **symbiotic generation**. Within this new system, "Form" is a dynamic carrier of "Meaning," while "Meaning" attains sensory manifestation through movement. Zong Baihua's "generative rhythm" serves as the internal logic here—where Xing and Yi are mutually constitutive (Ti-Yong). In my own creative practice, *Cloud Sleeves* (Yun Xiu), this relationship is central to the work's architecture. Using "clouds" as the image and "sleeves" as the form, the piece seeks a path to spiritual imagery between traditional vocabulary and modern somatic perception. The sleeve's line is the externalization of "Form," while the cloud's flow is a metaphor for "Meaning"; their spatial interplay facilitates a transition from the visible to the intangible. By guiding the spectator through somatic logic rather than narrative, the work achieves what Chinese aesthetics calls "the image beyond the image, the meaning within the meaning."

In summary, the contemporary expression of traditional dance elements is an integrated systemic renewal. Through the reconstruction of spectator relations, the translation of cultural contexts, and the symbiotic generation of Form and Meaning, contemporary dance achieves a creative "attainment of meaning through form." This reconstruction ensures the continuity of traditional spiritual imagery while imbuing the "Form-Meaning" logic of Eastern aesthetics with renewed vital tension.

Conclusion

The transition "from form to meaning" represents not only an aesthetic methodology for artistic creation but also a spiritual recursion of Chinese dance culture. The contemporary value of traditional dance elements lies not in the restoration of external forms but in the revitalization of their spirit; it resides not in the mere continuation of archaic techniques but in the reactivation of the body and perception, enabling classical aesthetics to radiate a renewed vitality within a contemporary spatio-temporal framework.

As demonstrated in the preceding analysis, the **abstraction of "Form"** liberates traditional formulae from fixed syntaxes, integrating them into a fluid spatial logic. The **symbolization of "Meaning"** transforms classical imagery into perceptual symbols of contemporary consciousness. Furthermore, the **aesthetic reconstruction of the "Form-Meaning" symbiosis** completes the translation of traditional dance aesthetics into contemporary experiential structures through the reconfiguration of spectator relations and cultural contexts. This process is essentially a cultural resurgence defined by "attaining meaning through form and revealing the Dao through meaning"—a transition that transforms dance from a historical legacy into a vibrant, contemporary presence. Consequently, the trajectory from "Form" to "Meaning" signifies a modern return to the essence of Chinese aesthetics. As Zong Baihua posited, the pinnacle of art lies in "generative rhythm"—the harmonious resonance between life and the cosmos, body and spirit. If contemporary choreography can perceive the genesis of "Meaning" within the rhythm of "Form," it can transcend formal innovation to reconnect with the metaphysical roots of Chinese art. In this context, "Form" is not merely the appearance of movement but a cultural cadence; "Meaning" is not merely an abstract emotion but a manifestation of somatic perception. Their symbiosis constitutes the ultimate aesthetic aim of Chinese art: "depicting spirit through form and actualizing form through meaning."

In summary, I contend that the contemporary expression of traditional dance elements should be understood as a dual generative process of aesthetic and cultural renewal: it reshapes classical imagery through somatic rhythm and achieves the re-manifestation of cultural spirit through formal modernization. Future research in Chinese dance aesthetics should continue to explore the dynamic interaction of the "Form-Meaning" relationship, investigating how body, space, time, and perception co-constitute meaning in contemporary contexts. This will allow traditional dance to serve as an authentic artistic bridge connecting antiquity and modernity, form and spirit. "From form to meaning" is more than an artistic path; it is a cultural stance—enabling Chinese dance to articulate the Eastern aesthetic narrative of life, time, and spirit on the global stage through its unique Qiyun and rhythm.

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