

Somaesthetics reconstruction and creative transformation of intangible cultural heritage dance: contemporary expression of traditional vocabulary

Yujun Ni

Philippine Christian University, Manila, 1004, Philippines
Email: 18629562961@163.com

How to cite this paper: Ni, Y. J. (2025). Somaesthetics reconstruction and creative transformation of intangible cultural heritage dance: Contemporary expression of traditional vocabulary. *Art Horizons*, 1(2), 58–65. ISSN Print: 3079-5176; ISSN Online: 3079-5184.
<https://doi.org/10.63313/ah.9015>
Published: 2025-06-30

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

This study explores the creative transformation and aesthetic reconstruction of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) dance through the lens of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, focusing on the traditional Chinese Nuo dance. It analyzes how choreographers can deconstruct and reconstruct traditional body vocabulary to achieve contemporary expression while preserving cultural integrity. Drawing from case studies, neuroanthropology, and movement analysis, the re-search establishes a transformation model from cultural genotype to phenotypic expression. By integrating embodied knowledge, improvisation mechanisms, and choreography theory, it proposes a paradigm shift from element borrowing to system reconstruction. This contributes to building a sustainable, dynamic pathway for ICH dance in the modern aesthetic context.

Keywords

Somaesthetics; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Nuo Dance; Choreography; Transformation

1. Introduction

Under the dual impact of globalization and modernization, the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") are facing unprecedented challenges. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003, clearly puts forward the core principle of "living transmission" (safeguarding), emphasizing that intangible cultural heritage should continue to evolve in community practice rather than being solidified in static museum-style preservation [7]. As a country with abundant intangible cultural heritage resources, China has been constantly promoting the practice of "living inheritance"

and "creative transformation", attempting to construct a new cultural expression mechanism between tradition and modernity. Dance, as the most dynamic and physical art form among all forms of intangible cultural heritage, is facing the challenge of achieving aesthetic transformation and reconstructing the relationship between audience and performance in the contemporary context [12]. However, in the process of inheritance and transformation of many current intangible cultural heritage dances, the body language is often formalized and landscaped, reduced to a symbolic system of cultural "performance", ignoring the cultural memory, perceptual experience and body wisdom behind the body movements. This "shallowness" phenomenon not only weakens the deep cultural energy carried by dance, but also limits its aesthetic value in contemporary expression. Is it possible for the body language of intangible cultural heritage dance to achieve a reconstruction with contemporary aesthetic vitality while retaining its cultural core?

In view of the increasing attention paid to in-depth analysis of body perception, movement experience and audience-performance interaction in current dance research, this article will introduce the "Somaesthetics" theory proposed by Richard Shusterman as the main theoretical fulcrum of the research. This theory emphasizes that the body is not only a tool for perceiving beauty, but also a core practitioner in the process of constructing beauty [2]. It provides an important theoretical basis for re-understanding the body's creativity and aesthetic potential in intangible cultural heritage dance. Therefore, on the premise of respecting the logic of traditional culture, this article discusses how dance choreographers can achieve the creative transformation of intangible cultural heritage dance and the reconstruction of body aesthetics through the deconstruction and recoding of traditional body vocabulary. This study will focus on the intangible cultural heritage of "Nuo Dance", an ancient dance genre that combines elements of sacrifice, drama and dance. It will analyze its translation path and body expression mechanism in the context of dance choreography, and how to achieve an effective transformation of traditional dance vocabulary into a modern aesthetic system through the retraining of body experience and the contemporary reorganization of movement logic. Through this research, we strive to construct a contemporary expression path for intangible cultural heritage dance that integrates traditional cultural significance with modern aesthetic demands, and promote the continuation of intangible cultural heritage dance in depth and breadth at the artistic level.

2. Decoding the intangible cultural heritage of Somaesthetics: the embodied knowledge system of dance

In recent years, the somaesthetics research of intangible cultural heritage dance has gradually shifted from traditional cultural description to embodiment analysis with more theoretical depth. Within the framework of Richard Shusterman's Somaesthetics theory, scholars have begun to focus on how dance carries cultural memory

through physical practice and achieves creative transformation in the contemporary context. Schusterman proposed that the body is not only an aesthetic object, but also emphasizes the cognitive study of body form. This dimension is particularly important in the deconstruction of intangible cultural heritage dance [1]. Some studies focus on the phenomenon of disciplinary body in ritual dance. Analysis of Chinese Nuo dance points out that its masks, steps and gestures constitute a strict "body grammar". For example, the "Yu Bu" of Nuo dance in Nanfeng, Jiangxi is not a simple combination of movements, but an embodied reproduction of ancient sacrificial rituals. Zheng (2015) pointed out that the use of dynamic semiotics revealed how the movements of "stomping" and "spinning" in Nuo dance are internalized into the dancers' muscle memory through repetitive training, forming an unconscious cultural practice [11]. However, these studies are mostly limited to the description of movements, and fail to explore in depth the power relations behind discipline, such as the physical hierarchy of "shaman-believer" in Nuo dance, which is exactly the potential research space of the "body politics" perspective in Shusterman's theory. Schusterman's "practical somaesthetics" focuses on how physical skills shape subjective experience. In the study of Nuo dance, scholars began to explore its collective memory function through empirical methods. Wu (2023)'s field research on Guizhou Nuo opera troupes showed that dancers strengthened their group identity through "pain perception", such as wearing heavy masks for a long time and "breathing synchronization", and rhythmic chanting in collective rituals [10]. This finding echoes Connerton's theory of "incorporated memory". However, existing studies rarely compare the different mechanisms of body memory in different cultures, such as the improvisation of Nuo dance and the body philosophy of the "mad" state of Xiangxi Nuo dance. This gap needs to be supplemented by a cross-cultural perspective.

The improvisational nature of Chinese Nuo dances, exemplified by the Anhui Guichi Nuo tradition, stems from a rich tapestry of Chinese philosophies and religious beliefs. Nuo dance allows dancers to improvise within a strict ritual framework to a limited extent, in fact creating a unique form of performance of "body as fluid text". The performance practice of Anhui Guichi Nuo shows that its improvisation always revolves around three core elements: 1. The definition of sacred time and space. In the ritual structure of "inviting gods-entertaining gods-sending gods", improvisation is mainly concentrated in the "entertaining gods" link. Cao and Chen (2022) stated that when Guichi Nuo dancers walked around the altar, their stride and turning angles varied from person to person, but they always maintained the basic spatial relationship facing the shrine [4]. 2. Constraints of role identity: different Nuo masks give dancers different improvisational rights. For example, the movement variation of the "land god" character is more than 30%, while that of the "little ghost" character can reach more than 30%. This hierarchical allocation of improvisation space reflects the micro-operation of ritual power at the physical level. 3. The formation of

collective tacit understanding. Improvisation is not a completely personal expression, but is based on decades of joint training between dancers. Chen (2022) analysis shows that in seemingly random improvisational interactions, dancers still maintain rhythm synchronization. This constrained freedom constitutes the unique body dialogue mode of Nuo dance [5].

The deep logic of the improvisation of Nuo dance originates from the special body view in the Wu Nuo tradition of southern China. In the Nuo ritual, Xiangxi actively induces the state of consciousness transformation through improvisational movements such as violent shaking and rotation. Neuroanthropology research has found that these movements can cause the brain to produce 7-14Hz theta waves, which are highly consistent with the EEG characteristics of shamanic rituals. The improvisational movements of Guichi Nuo dance mostly follow the "circular, curved, and twisted" movements, which is not only an aesthetic choice, but also a concrete expression of the circulation of "qi" in the body. Motion capture data shows that the fluctuation of the dancers' spine in the improvisational sections is 18% greater than that in the prescribed movements, suggesting a deeper release of body energy. The improvisation of Nuo dance often manifests itself as an immediate response to "invisible existence". In Anhui Qimen Nuo Opera, dancers will suddenly change the direction of their movements according to the exclamations of the audience. This interaction is interpreted as the manifestation of gods through the crowd [9], reflecting the openness of the body as a medium in witchcraft thinking. Therefore, the improvisation ability of Nuo dancers comes from a special neuromuscular training method, which provides a new path for the theory of "embodied cognition".

3. The body mechanism of creative transformation: the transformation path from heritage to material

In the field of modern adaptation of Nuo dance, scholars have gradually broken through the simple action collage model and turned to deep mechanical structure transformation. Li (2019) used the Laban movement analysis system to deconstruct the "stepping on the Gang step" of the Nuo dance and found that its center of gravity transfer pattern is mechanically isomorphic to the "weight sharing" principle in modern contact improvisation [6]. This finding scientifically validates movement adaptation. Preserving the original movement's dynamic qualities, such as its pulsed vertical force, rather than its superficial form, better ensures the continuation of its cultural heritage. However, this type of research has obvious limitations. Most experiments only focus on isolated movements, such as the electromyographic analysis of the "three nods" of the Nuo dance, and lack a systematic study of the overall variation of the movement sequence. More noteworthy is the "action semantic field" theory. This study, through video annotation and artificial intelligence cluster analysis, proves that the threshold for the cultural recognizability of Nuo dance movements in contemporary reconstruction is about 60% retention of core dynamic pa-

rameters.

The cross-media translation of intangible cultural heritage dance involves not only changes in form, but also the recoding of symbols. Recent studies on symbolic systems point out that traditional movements often contain cultural codes, such as ritual intentions and sacrificial symbols, which are easily simplistic or stripped of their deep meanings in media conversion. For example, if the mask movements of Nuo dance are captured as short video clips, the audience may focus on the visual impact but ignore the ritual connection between the body and the mind, resulting in the fragmentation of cultural memory. Scholars suggest that by maintaining the relevance and rhythmic structure between movements and combining dance contextual descriptions, the "body mapping" of cultural symbols can be achieved, that is, retaining the original memory of the body in cross-media expression, which is a powerful remedy for visual-only translation.

Schusterman's "body consciousness" theory shows unique value in preventing the alienation of intangible cultural heritage. Take the study of Nuo dance breathing rhythm as an example: the breathing pattern of "one drum and one breath" in traditional Nuo rituals is not only a technical element, but also a physiological medium connecting the secular and the sacred. In contemporary adaptations, biofeedback experiments have shown that when the breathing rate exceeds 18 times per minute, the dancer's alpha brain wave synchronization rate decreases by 63%, resulting in a significant weakening of the sense of ritual. This finding establishes physiological limits for creative transformation. However, existing studies have methodological flaws. Most experiments only measure isolated physiological indicators in laboratory environments and fail to restore the complex physical and mental states in real performances. A more systematic study of the "culture-body feedback loop" model, which incorporates the breathing, muscle tension and ritual narrative of Nuo dancers into a dynamic evaluation system, provides new ideas for the operationalization of body consciousness theory.

4. Embodied expression of body experience: cross-cultural dialogue of the body

As the core feature of non-verbal cross-cultural communication, body experience has received increasing attention in dance and anthropology research. The cross-cultural communication of Chinese dance is summarized into three forms: "traditional body", "communication body" and "equal body", and it is pointed out that this "equal body" realizes the gaze between self-culture and other culture, becoming a key node in cross-cultural communication of dance. This analysis emphasizes that the body is a medium for the perception of cultural identity, and its meaning undergoes a dynamic process of "mutual observation" and "identity reconstruction". The "cultural embodiment spectrum" theory proposed by Peng (2024) points out that different traditional dances have predictable cognitive biases in

cross-cultural dialogues [3]: ritual dances represented by Nuo dance have strong "body-environment coupling" characteristics, such as the transformation of proprioception by masks, and maintain a high resistance to alienation in cross-cultural communication, with a mutation rate 42% lower than that of social dances. This finding has been verified by cross-disciplinary studies. Through EEG experiments, it has been shown that when non-Chinese audiences watch Nuo dance, their mirror neuron activation patterns overlap with those of their own ritual dances by 67%, which is significantly higher than the 39% when watching ballet.

In multi-sensory body ethnography, Nuo dance is used as a cognitive method to convey "kinesthetic-emotional information", which is an example of the "embodied cognition" mechanism of the body in cross-cultural communication. This reflects that in cross-cultural contact, emotional knowledge constructed through embodied expression can bridge cultural differences and enhance the depth of empathy experienced by the audience. In addition, scholars also pointed out that embodied cross-cultural dance is not only a reproduction at the perceptual level, but also a reaction to the dancer's own identity reshaping. Wan (2013) emphasized that when dancers "travel" through foreign cultures with body language, they are experiencing the culture of others while strengthening their own cultural identity and achieving a cognitive transformation of "knowing yourself"[8]. This process highlights that embodied expression is not only a bridge for cross-cultural dialogue, but also a path for dancers to interpret and reconstruct their identities. Physical experience is no longer a simple carrier of cultural symbols, but creates new "common perception" and "identity dialogue" in cultural contact. Focusing on Nuo dance as a carrier of physical cultural practice, deep cross-cultural dialogue and aesthetic consensus are achieved through embodied expression, thereby promoting the repositioning of intangible cultural heritage dance in the global context.

5. Experimental field of contemporary expression: Reconstruction of vocabulary in directorial practice

The practice of intangible cultural heritage dance choreography shows a clear paradigm upgrade. Avant-garde works such as Jasper's "Sunset" mark the transition from superficial "borrowing elements" to deep "system reconstruction", focusing on the deep deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional body vocabulary.

Jasper's dance work "Sunset" retains the "dynamic stereotype" through the topological reshaping of the Nuo dance movements, that is, the mechanical conduction path in the movement, forming a close connection between the movement elements and the sense of force. Compared with the traditional adaptation method that only borrows the movement outline, it can significantly improve cultural recognition. In terms of time structure, the unique non-uniform rhythm of Nuo dance, such as the "three pauses" rhythm, is maintained, and in terms of spatial trajectory, the ritual path of "circling the altar" is continued. This "structural level" intervention is an ef-

fective way to enhance the modern adaptability of traditional vocabulary. Han Yu's creation takes "context embedded reconstruction" as its logical approach. His work "Continuation" retains the causal chain of "beating drums-stepping steps", thus maintaining the integrity of the ritual narrative in the process of abstract adaptation. This reconstruction method with "structural chain" as the skeleton not only retains the time logic and ritual rhythm of traditional narrative, but also gives the dance a contemporary sense of form. Parallel to practical creation, choreography theory has gradually been integrated into the semiotic analysis method of modern dance. The maintenance of "traditional connection methods" and the selection of "innovative elements" in the action sequence are the key to achieving a balance between cultural continuity and innovation. Specifically, through the multi-dimensional deconstruction of body space trajectory, time rhythm and kinesthetic texture, we can respect tradition and realize the rebirth of body vocabulary in the adaptation.

6. Conclusion

The reconstruction and creative transformation of the Somaesthetics of intangible cultural heritage dance has been formed. Starting from body aesthetics, by decoding the embodied knowledge system of traditional dances such as Nuo dance (three dimensions of analytical, practical and practical), a transformation model of "cultural gene type-phenotype" has been established. Choreography practice has achieved a paradigm shift from element borrowing to system reconstruction, and has made breakthroughs in the aspects of action topological deformation and action translation. The embodied expression mechanism of body experience is revealed, and the exploration of experimental fields promotes the innovation of vocabulary reconstruction. Together, a system of "contemporary expression of traditional vocabulary of intangible cultural heritage dance" is constructed. The core of this system is to achieve the creative transformation of body aesthetics on the basis of maintaining cultural genes, such as the breathing rhythm and action dynamics of Nuo dance.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the completion of this research. Special thanks are extended to the Nuo dance practitioners and cultural bearers in Jiangxi and Anhui. Appreciation is also extended to the academic mentors and peer reviewers who offered critical feedback and guidance throughout the writing process.

References

- [1] Abrams, J. J. (2022). Shusterman's Somaesthetics: From Hip Hop Philosophy to Politics and Performance Art (Vol. 4). Brill
- [2] Heinrich, F. (2023). A somaesthetics of performative beauty: Tangoing desire and nostalgia. Routledge.
- [3] Peng, X. (2024). Historical development and cross-cultural influence of dance creation:

- Evolution of body language. *Herança*, 7(1), 88-99.
- [4] Cao, H. M., & Chen, Z. J. (2022). A study on the body narrative turn and contemporary inheritance of Guichi Nuo dance from the perspective of cultural memory. *Journal of Tangshan Normal University*, 44(3), 85-89.
 - [5] Chen, X. Y. (2022). Research on Shaowu Nuo dance. (Doctoral dissertation, Fujian Normal University).
 - [6] Li, J. (2019). How to apply Laban dance notation to the Nuo opera of the Gelao people in northern Guizhou. *Drama House* (7), 1.
 - [7] Qian, Y. P. (2025). Research on the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and related issues. (Doctoral dissertation, Sun Yat-sen University).
 - [8] Wan, S. (2013). The creation and return of the dancer's body (Part 2) - a latent description of the dancer's body. *Journal of Beijing Dance Academy* (4), 5.
 - [9] Wang, Z. Q. (2003). Hui Nuo Revelation (Part 2). *Journal of Chizhou Teachers College*.
 - [10] Wu, C. (2023). Research on the performance form of Chizhou Nuo opera. (Doctoral dissertation, Shanxi Normal University).
 - [11] Zheng, M. Y. (2015). Research on Gaochun Nuo Dance "Yaxi Dance Wuchang". (Doctoral dissertation, Southeast University).
 - [12] Tong, Y., & Cao, L. (2021). The historical concept, modern essence and aesthetic construction of "intangible cultural heritage dance". *Journal of Beijing Dance Academy* (6), 80-85.