

Original Paper

The Cultural Essence of the "Circle" in Chinese Classical Dance

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Master of Chinese aesthetics, Mr. Zong Baihua, once said: "'Dance' is the quintessence of all artistic realms in China," and "it is a symbol of the creative process of the universe." As the oldest of all art forms, dance itself contains the most ancient and mysterious connotations. The extension, rotation, twisting, and leaping movements of the human body in dance have a strong impact on emotional expression. Dance is the most silent art, yet it can evoke the deepest resonance in the human spirit, hence it is also known as the "silent art."

As an art form, dance is deeply influenced by China's 5,000-year-old traditional culture. Chinese classical dance, as a typical representative of Chinese dance, contains a deep cultural core and, like any other traditional Chinese art form, embodies the spirit of Chinese traditional art in every aspect. What is the connotation of traditional Chinese art? It seems all-encompassing: the solemnity of Confucianism, the detachment of Taoism, the emptiness of Zen Buddhism, the humor of the folk, the elegance of the literati, the mystery of Tai Chi, and the Yin-Yang. All these originate from the foundation of Chinese traditional culture, which is the emotional consciousness with a strong Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophical meaning that grows out of the roots of Chinese culture, and this is the essence of Chinese art.

Influenced by the Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, Chinese artistic expression is always reserved and implicit, different from the West, which is quite straightforward. Chinese art creates "images" that have profound connotations, integrating subjectivity and objectivity, and blending emotions, intentions, and forms, as its most significant characteristic. Mr. Ye Lang once said: "In the view of Chinese classical aesthetics, the essence of poetry is aesthetic intention." But it's not just poetry; for the entirety of Chinese art, "image" is the core means of expression. Mr. Zong Baihua pointed out incisively that "creating realms from the mind" and "turning the void into reality" encompass the entire essence of Chinese painting, and Chinese dance art is no exception.

All elements of Chinese classical dance, whether movements or dynamics and structure, are influenced by the essence of Chinese art. All the dynamic forms and "spirit and rhythm" of dance have profound connections with Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, and cosmology. The most typical image in classical

dance is the "circle." Therefore, this article will discuss the "circle" in classical dance, trace back to its origins, and explore the primitive genes of the national artistic tradition buried in the Chinese cultural soil.

The so-called image is to "exhaust the meaning through the form." The core of Chinese dance movement laws is "drawing circles," and this dynamic rhythm is most fully and centrally reflected in classical dance. This dynamic image is visually clear and distinct, vivid and easy to perceive, and naturally generates associations during the perception process, leading to deeper insights and thus receiving more "meaning." As early as tens of thousands of years ago, when the ancestors of the Chinese nation looked up to the sky and down to the yellow soil on this land, they used their totem sacrificial dances to express their strong sense of life and various hopes for life, as well as their worship and prayer to the spirits.

"Circle" runs through the entire body movement of dance. Specifically, it mainly refers to the "three circles" and "two circles," which are the "horizontal circle," "vertical circle," and "figure-eight circle," as well as "large circle within a small circle." Other postures, such as twisting, tilting, and bending, also belong to the dynamic range of "circle."

These traces of movement naturally evoke associations with the Tai Chi diagram. The Tai Chi diagram is a graphical representation that symbolizes the principles of the "I Ching" (Book of Changes), often used in conjunction with the Bagua. There are a considerable number of "I Ching" diagrams passed down through the ages. Although these diagrams vary in form, they all simulate the patterns of heaven and earth, containing information about the laws of the universe, the changes of Yin and Yang, and centrally represent the core content of the "I Ching." The Tai Chi diagram is a typical representative.

The Tai Chi diagram uses a large circular ring, an S-line, and two small circles, supplemented by the interplay of black and white colors, to form the basic "I Ching" imagery of the diagram. First, the large circular ring represents "Taiji." The outer circle of the Tai Chi diagram symbolizes the cosmic space where vital energy is mixed as one. Additionally, the "S" line in the diagram divides the entire circle into two contrasting and corresponding parts, symbolizing Yin and Yang. The Yin and Yang fishes separated by the "S" line represent the two opposing and mutually fluctuating material forces in nature, and the two small circles represent the eyes of the black and white fishes, symbolizing "Yin within Yang" and "Yang within Yin." The Tai Chi diagram displays the "Two Forms," "Four Images," and "Eight Trigrams," directly fitting the essence of the universe, and its imagery contains many complex spiritual concepts and endless philosophies about life, nature, and society.

The above is the basic characteristic of the Tai Chi diagram, so what is the connection between the dynamic form of Chinese classical dance and the Tai Chi diagram?

Firstly, the "horizontal circle" and "vertical circle" in classical dance are relatively simple and, compared to the Tai Chi diagram, resemble the outer circle of the diagram. The "figure-eight circle" and "large circle within a small circle" are not exactly the same as the Tai Chi diagram, but they are not different in nature and characteristics. The most representative is the "figure-eight circle." Because this

form is relatively the most distinct graphic in classical dance dynamics compared to the Tai Chi diagram, but at the same time, it encompasses all the essence of dance "circle drawing" dynamics—circle, twist, and bend. Therefore, clarifying the relationship between the "figure-eight circle" and the Tai Chi diagram also clarifies the cultural genes behind the "circle" dynamics in Chinese classical dance.

Why does the "figure-eight circle" dynamic exist in classical dance?

When studying any artistic phenomenon in the world, tracing back to its origins, one can only find the roots and opportunities for its emergence in the culture of its own nation. The Soviet aesthetician M. M. Kagan has a viewpoint: in the large system of culture, philosophy plays the role of "cultural consciousness," and art plays the role of "cultural self-consciousness." Therefore, based on the dynamic characteristics of classical dance, we can determine that this is a reflection of ancient Chinese cultural consciousness in the art of dance.

According to the ancient Chinese philosophy, regarded as the noumenon and life of the universe and all things, "Qi" is the root of movement, and change of all things in heaven and earth. If so, the noumenon and life of all things in heaven and earth are "Qi," and humans are "one of the things." There are similar statements, such as "People are born with Qi and die when the essence is exhausted." These expressions all affirm one point: the subject of dance activity, humans, and their activity space are different forms of "Qi." In this sense, dance can be regarded as an artistic activity where "Qi" interacts with "Qi." The "force" projected by the human body's "Qi" interacts with the space's "Qi," occupying different spaces, creating different pressures, forming different directional angles. In this series of confrontations and conflicts, unifications and resolutions, inductions and reflections, the rhythm of dance is gradually formed. A movement image of Qi's cyclical and endless motion. But why is this "Qi" reflected in the "figure-eight circle"? In fact, if we regard the "S" line in the Tai Chi diagram as the image of the universe's "Qi transformation" or "all things are born from it," then the formation of classical dance dynamics will also have corresponding connections and inspirations.

The above is a more abstract discussion of the relationship between the "figure-eight circle" and the Tai Chi diagram. Specifically, there are three main reasons behind it.

Firstly, the national mode of thinking has a direct impact on artistic creation in terms of linearity. The "I Ching" has a profound influence on the spiritual culture of the Chinese people, which also determines that it is the cultural cornerstone behind all traditional arts. The "I Ching" uses Bagua to explain various phenomena in nature, society, and human history, the so-called "covering the way of heaven and earth." Bagua is formed by the mutual overlap of Yang Yao and Yin Yao or self-overlap. The characteristic of the Bagua structure is that "the total number of Yang Yao and Yin Yao is equal, both being twelve. Bagua is structurally opposite to each other in pairs. The spatial arrangement of the Gua forms a circle that is cyclical and self-circulating."

Secondly, the cultural personality and emotional expression pattern of the nation. Chinese culture has always had the characteristic of introspection. At the same time, due to the significant influence of

Confucian culture on the Chinese nation, which advocates the doctrine of the mean and pursues a moderate and peaceful humanistic spirit, pursuing "joy without indulgence, sorrow without injury," there is a conscious control over the intensity of emotional expression. Therefore, the Chinese have formed a reserved cultural psychology. Cultural psychology inevitably affects artistic expression. When the four major factors in dance—gravity, time, space, and fluidity—and the eight major movement elements—chopping, pressing, rushing, twisting, dotting, floating, sliding, and flashing—are considered, there is a natural emphasis on the factors of "twisting" and "time," so the formation of a soft and implicit figure-eight circle shape is an inevitable result under the influence of this mode of thinking.

Lastly, traditional aesthetics. Traditional artistic aesthetics emphasize the symmetrical arrangement of composition in terms of front and back, left and right, and tend to form a surrounding layout with a central point as the axis. This is reflected in tomb stone carvings, religious grottoes, paper-cuttings, New Year paintings, and is especially evident in Chinese architecture. The Forbidden City is a typical representative.

Therefore, the formation of the "figure-eight circle" in Chinese classical dance is closely related to the national cultural psychology, emotional expression pattern, thinking mode, and aesthetic view.

In summary, the essence of the "drawing circles" dynamic in classical dance is ultimately a movement image of Qi's cyclical and endless motion, as well as the spiritual image of the dancer's "heart and Qi." The "circle" in Chinese dance, along with its dynamic "turning," is the most fundamental and essential movement rule of Chinese dance under the influence of traditional philosophy. It is a wonderful understanding of the universe's essence and the "Tao" of dance. Behind it lies the cultural genes rooted in thousands of years of Chinese traditional culture, which are the cultural psychology, emotional expression pattern, thinking mode, and aesthetic view inherent in the Chinese nation. Chinese classical dance not only shows the characteristics of Chinese dance but also implies the mysteries of human life movement, with unique imagery and aesthetic style.

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