

Classical Dance "Never Let Autumn Down: The Ginkgo's Ode"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Chinese classical dance piece "Never Let Autumn Down: The Ginkgo's Ode" through three aesthetic lenses: bodily expression, spatiotemporal imagery, and cultural symbolism. It examines how the choreography creates a poetic interplay between "ginkgo" and "autumn" using classical dance techniques such as form, spirit, energy, and rhythm, while conveying Eastern philosophical reflections on life through the interplay of reality and illusion. The study reveals that the work dynamically reconstructs natural imagery through bodily semiotics, offering a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional aesthetics via the concept of "unity between object and self."

KEYWORDS

Bodily expression; Spatiotemporal imagery; Dance affectivity; Cultural symbolism

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Context

Chinese classical dance, deeply rooted in traditional culture, draws from opera, martial arts, and poetry, adhering to aesthetic principles such as "harmony of form and spirit" (xing shen jian bei) and "vivid rhythmic vitality" (qi yun sheng dong). Recent choreographic trends have shifted from historical narratives to modern explorations of natural imagery, using movement to explore the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. "Never Let Autumn Down" employs the ginkgo—a "living fossil" symbolizing longevity, resilience, and autumnal beauty in Chinese culture—as a medium to both preserve and innovate classical natural philosophy. Historically, literati like Li Qingzhao infused emotions into ginkgo imagery (e.g., "its grace lacks ostentation yet embodies nobility"); this dance revitalizes such symbolism through dynamic bodily expressions.

Amidst ecological crises and humanistic reflections, dance increasingly engages with natural themes, resonating with the Eastern concept of "unity of heaven and humanity" (tian ren he yi). By choreographing the ginkgo's life cycle (growth, flourish, decline, and quiescence), the work intertwines natural laws with existential meditation, aligning with contemporary ecological aesthetics that emphasize coexistence and reverence for life.

1.2 Research Significance

This study enriches the field of classical dance imagery by analyzing the ginkgo's kinetic articulation, expanding the theoretical framework of "expressing emotions through objects" (jie wu yu qing) in Chinese dance. It reveals the transformation from symbolic representation to affective ontology, synthesizing dance studies, eco-aesthetics, and semiotics to decode the immersive autumnal experience constructed through bodily language, music, and lighting. The research also proposes innovative pathways for integrating classical "shenyun" techniques (e.g., "ti chen" [lift-sink], "chong kao" [rush-lean]) with modern choreographic concepts like abstraction and spatial storytelling, advancing theories of contemporary reinvention in Chinese classical dance.

The work revitalizes traditional symbols through dance, enhancing cultural identity and aesthetic resonance with Eastern philosophies. It advocates for ecological ethics through kinetic narratives, addressing global sustainability via metaphors of life cycles. The choreography offers methodologies for "naturalizing dance," including motion design (spins and lifts simulating falling leaves), costume chromatic transitions (golden gradients), and musical dynamics (lento-fermata-stillness). It also facilitates the international dissemination of Chinese classical dance by leveraging universal natural themes to transcend cultural barriers.

2 Bodily Language in "Never Let Autumn Down"

2.1 Kinetic Morphology and Spatial Narratives

Mimetic and Symbolic Movement Lexicon:

Arm techniques: Classical hand positions like "Xiaowuhua" (small flower hands) and "Yunshou" (cloud hands) integrate fingertip tremors and extensions to mimic ginkgo leaves trembling and unfurling in the wind.

Torso undulations: Movements like “Han tian” (contract-expand) and “chong kao” (rush-lean) articulate the swaying and resilience of branches.

Lower-body dynamics: The fluidity of “yuanchangbu” (circular steps) contrasts with static poses like “tanhai” (sea-gazing) and “shelian” (wild-goose shooting), visualizing the duality of “falling and rooting.”

Group spatial choreography: Formation shifts (fan-shaped expansions, spiral ascents) simulate wind-driven leaf trajectories, while soloist interventions accentuate autumn's temporal stratification.

Rhythmic Dialectics:

Tempo juxtapositions: Rapid “xiaotiao” (small jumps) alternate with controlled descents, metaphorizing the ginkgo's transition from vitality to decline.

Motion-stasis interplay: Frozen “liangxiang” poses (single-leg balances, torsal twists) intercut with continuous circular flows embody “eternity within ephemerality.”

Costume and Scenographic Extensions:

Flowing skirts amplify leaf-fluttering imagery through tosses, furls, and ripple-like undulations. Projected leaf shadows interact with dancers' kinetics, creating multidimensional stage realities.

2.2 Breath Modulation and Affective Kinetics

Biomechanics of Respiration: Inhalation energizes upward surges (e.g., “wings greeting wind” with billowing yellow skirts), while exhalation anchors downward collapses (e.g., “woyu” [crouching fish] floorwork), corporealizing the binary of growth and decay.

“Qi” (breath) segmentation: Staccato “lifted breath” sustains aerial lightness during group spins, whereas solo sequences deploy protracted “sinking breath” to materialize temporal suspension.

2.3 Interaction Logic of Form and Breath

“Form Breaks, Breath Connects”:

This aesthetic principle utilizes brief pauses during movement transitions (e.g., stillness after a “rollover”) to create momentary breaks in form, while maintaining the continuity of imagery through sustained breath flow (e.g., subtle chest undulations).

This prevents emotional disconnection and preserves the cohesive narrative of the dance.

“Breath Transforms Form”: A Modern Breakthrough

The choreography innovates beyond the stylized breathing patterns of classical Chinese dance by incorporating improvisational breath control (e.g., sudden breath-holding or audible panting). This approach externalizes the vitality of the ginkgo imagery, granting it visceral authenticity.

Summary: Dual Breakthroughs via Form-Breath Design

Object Embodiment Without Literal Imitation: Reconstructs natural imagery through classical dance vocabulary, transcending mere mimicry of nature.

Breath as Narrative Agent: Elevates respiration from a “movement accessory” to an “emotional carrier,” enabling technical details to convey philosophical ideas.

Innovation: Proposes “breath visualization”—revealing breath trajectories through rhythmic articulation, establishing a new paradigm for studying the “form-spirit relationship” in classical dance.

3 Spatiotemporal Imagery: Multilayered Narrative of Autumn

3.1 Temporal Dimensions: Flux, Cycles and Eternity

Natural Time:

Seasonal transitions are symbolized through gradual costume color shifts (cyan-green to gold) and lighting temperature changes. Falling-leaf movements (slow spins, abrupt drops) use kinetic “speed differentials” to embody life's fragility and time's relativity.

Existential Time:

Linear time (fallen leaves returning to roots) contrasts with cyclical time (dancers circling like tree rings), reflecting Daoist philosophy: “Life begets death, death begets life.” Frozen poses (“suspended leaves”) juxtaposed with fluid group choreography symbolize transient life versus eternal natural order.

Cultural Time:

Movements like “gazing at autumn over railings” or “contemplating fallen leaves” evoke classical poetry, bridging millennia of autumn melancholy. Electronic clock-ticking sounds critique modern time anxiety, contrasting with the

ginkgo's "slow growth."

3.2 Spatial Dimensions: Reality, Layers and Boundaries

Vertical Symbolism:

Leaps (upward) and floorwork (downward) construct a "canopy-ground-root" axis, mirroring heaven-earth-humanity relations.

Horizontal Fluidity:

Group formations (fan-shaped/spiral trajectories) mimic wind-swept leaves, creating "sparse-dense-dispersed" spatial rhythms that amplify nature's unpredictability.

Virtual-Physical Hybridity:

Projections of ginkgo forests (from lush to barren) merge digital environments with live bodies, transcending physical stage limits.

Light as Border Dissolver:

Fog effects and selective spotlighting erase spatial boundaries, crafting an immersive "boundless autumn."

3.3 Spatiotemporal Interweaving: Dancers as Temporal-spatial Fabric

Embodied Chronotopes:

Axial spins symbolize temporal cycles; shrinking spin radii map emotional contraction. Soloist "falls" (time ruptured) countered by group lifts (space redeemed) dramatize spacetime dialectics.

Sonic Collaboration:

Guzheng's free rhythms echo temporal uncertainty; Xiao flute tones stretch spatial depth. Glitchy electronic samples induce temporal disorientation.

Silence as Temporal-Spatial Punctuation:

Deliberate pauses create perceptual voids, prompting audiences to re-examine humanity-nature dynamics.

4 Cultural Metaphors: Contemporary Translation of Traditional Aesthetics

The "ginkgo tree" at the stage center symbolizes "homeland" as both a natural root and a spiritual sanctuary. Its choreographic language—such as the "falling leaves returning to roots" motif—modernizes nostalgia as a metaphysical longing. Botanically, the ginkgo serves as a temporal marker of autumn phenology, while culturally, it embodies longevity (Compendium of Materia Medica) and resilience (Guo Moruo's poem "Ginkgo"). Philosophically, it merges the ecological worldview of "harmony between heaven and humanity" with the cyclical return to origins. This reimagining of classical aesthetics subverts the traditional "autumn lament," reframing the season through "quiet beauty" and "selfless devotion" (e.g., leaves decaying to nourish the earth).

Digital stage technologies extend traditional poetic imagery—projections create surreal scenes like "rain of falling leaves"—while improvised interactions (e.g., prop leaves drifting into the audience) dissolve the stage-audience boundary, forging a participatory "human-nature-art" relationship.

4.1 Cultural Significance of Spatiotemporal Imagery

The work ritualizes natural temporality and spatiality to critique industrialization's erosion of "slow time" and ecological space, advocating for renewed human-nature symbiosis.

Traditional philosophies like "cyclical renewal" are reincarnated through bodily syntax and digital media, revitalizing classical motifs for the technological age. As a pan-Asian cultural symbol, the ginkgo's spatiotemporal imagery risks reduction to "Orientalist" spectacle in global tours but also holds potential as a transcultural bridge, fostering cross-temporal dialogue through dance.

4.2 Cultural Archetypes and Modern Reconfiguration

Subverting "Autumn Lament":

The work replaces traditional melancholic autumnal tropes with kinetic "golden leaf storms," redefining autumn as a spatiotemporal paradox of abundance and decay.

Translating "Garden Aesthetics":

Using the "scenery-shifting" logic of classical Chinese gardens, dancers navigate light-shadow interplay to transform the stage into a cosmic microcosm.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Body as Symbolic Translator: From Form to Spirit

The choreography synthesizes classical Chinese dance's "circularity, curvature, torsion, and tilt" with ginkgo morphology: "cloud hands" mimic leaf unfurling; "ocean-reaching" postures allegorize root systems. This achieves a tripartite translation—"object-body-emotion." By punctuating breath rhythms (e.g., suspended inhalations mirroring leaves poised to fall), it transcends superficial mimicry, embedding natural imagery with philosophical depth. Contact improvisation techniques deconstruct classical formalism into decentralized "kinetic landscapes," where dancers' collisions and supports evoke wind-scattered leaves. The movement chain "weightlessness-fall-rebirth" metaphorizes modernity's temporal anxiety and regenerative yearning, positioning the body as a vessel for *zeitgeist*.

5.2 Spatiotemporal Innovation: Fragmentary Autumn Narratives

The work shatters linear "introduction-development-climax-resolution" structures, instead collaging "autumn fragments" (e.g., juxtaposing childhood leaf-gathering with elder solos) to reconstruct memory-present dialogues. Real-time interactive projections (e.g., dancers triggering virtual leaf trajectories) expand physical space into "cyber-nature," destabilizing reality-virtuality binaries. Ecological allegories emerge through "tree-leaf-wind-soil" cycles: chaotic group collisions resolving into rootward crawling form a micro-epic of environmental rupture and repair. Lighting contrasts—"artificial dusk" vs. "natural shadows"—critique industrial distortion of temporal order, positioning the work as eco-critical avant-garde.

5.3 Cultural Renewal Through Metaphor

Reversing "Autumn Sorrow":

Golden leaves surging like flames celebrate vitality, embodying the Eastern dialectic: "decay begets renewal."

Ginkgo's Semantic Shift:

From "longevity totem" to "ecological crisis symbol," the finale's withered tree projection and seedling gestures recontextualize cultural icons within environmental discourse.

Intermedia Metaphorization:

Literary motifs transmute into choreographic language, exemplifying dance as a medium of cultural evolution.

"Never Let Autumn Down" is a corporeal "cultural renewal movement." For classical dance, it demonstrates how traditional vocabulary regains relevance through technological and philosophical reinvention. For global discourse, it proposes "natural consensus over civilizational clash" as a soft-power model. For eco-aesthetics, it pioneers non-didactic, body-centric ecological awakening. Its legacy may lie in catalyzing a "ginkgo paradigm"—a gateway for globalizing China's natural-artistic symbology.

About the Author

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