

The Symphony of Wood and Dance: Exploring the Role of Wood Culture in Chinese Traditional Dance

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This study explores the significance of wood as a surrogate of nature in Chinese traditional dance, emphasizing a multifaceted role as a functional, symbolic, and sensory element in cultural transmission and as an element of artistic expression. The analysis considers wooden props such as fans and drums used in the dance performance, the symbolic meanings conveyed by wood in dance, and its deep connection to nature and life. Through their biophilic interaction with wood, dancers articulate a reverence for nature and reflections on life, creating a unique cultural resonance with the audience. Detailed case studies of the Han ethnic group's Jiaozhou Yangge Fan Dance and the Tibetan Reba Dance illustrate the pivotal role of wood in choreography, emotional expression, and cultural identity, rooted in regional cultural discourses. Despite challenges from modern materials, contemporary efforts to innovate wood's use in dance highlight its enduring relevance. Future research can focus on the innovative incorporation of wood in contemporary dance to promote the integration of traditional and modern dance arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Wood, a vital element of the natural world, has been significant in Chinese traditional culture for centuries (Di Cosmo 1994; Thi Hong Hanh 2006). Beyond its role as a fundamental material for architecture and tools, wood serves as a powerful carrier of cultural and artistic expression (Payne 2009; Holmquist *et al.* 2019). Rich in symbolism, wood is often linked to life, the soul, emotions, and the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature (Roux *et al.* 2022). It embodies the values of resilience, growth, and vitality, deeply embedded in Chinese cultural identity. Among its diverse applications, wood has profoundly shaped the development of traditional dance, functioning as both a practical tool and a symbolic medium for artistic expression and a reflection of material culture (Barber 1987). Despite its historical significance, the integrated role of wood as a functional, symbolic, and sensory element in dance, bridging tradition and modernity, remains underexplored, providing a novel focus for this study.

As a comprehensive art form, traditional dance seamlessly combines physical expression, music, costumes, props, and stage design into a harmonious ensemble (Giurchescu 2001). Among these elements, wood plays a distinctive and irreplaceable role, particularly in creating props and stage backdrops. Wooden props, such as fans, drums, and

staffs, transcend their practical functions to become symbolic extensions of the dancer's body and emotions (Kozinets 2002). The unique texture, form, and auditory qualities of these wooden elements enrich the dancer's visual and emotional dimensions, providing a multi-sensory experience for both performers and audiences. For example, the rhythmic resonance of a wooden drum can evoke a primal connection to the earth, grounding the performance in cultural and spiritual tradition. Similarly, the fluid movements of a fan crafted from wood can symbolize the delicate interplay between humanity and the natural world, capturing the beauty and dynamism of this relationship. These wooden props not only enhance the artistic depth of the performance but also serve as powerful cultural symbols, bridging the gap between tradition and the audience's experience (Barber 1987).

Moreover, the use of wood extends beyond props to encompass the stage design itself. Intricately crafted with natural patterns, traditional wooden stages create an ambiance that aligns harmoniously with the performance themes (Zelef 2014). The acoustic properties of wood enhance the auditory aspects of the dance, amplifying sounds such as percussive footwork or the rhythmic beats of accompanying music, thereby enriching the overall sensory experience. Additionally, wooden backdrops, often embellished with carvings and symbolic motifs, function not only as visual enhancements but also as cultural narratives (Blankenship and Tan 2020). These elements establish a connection between the performance and its historical and regional origins, deepening its cultural connotation and significance.

Despite its historical significance, the role of wood in traditional dance faces challenges from modern materials and techniques, which have sometimes diminished the use of traditional wooden props and stage elements (Hou *et al.* 2022; Du 2023). However, contemporary dance artists and cultural practitioners are increasingly exploring innovative ways to incorporate wood, blending traditional craftsmanship with modern design to ensure its relevance in today's cultural landscape (Karakul 2019). These efforts not only preserve the cultural and artistic value of wood but also expand its potential, bridging heritage and innovation (Barber 1987; Karakul 2019). These efforts not only safeguard the symbolic and functional aspects of wood in traditional dance but also expand its artistic potential, bridging the divide between cultural heritage and contemporary innovation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006). By doing so, they preserve the essence of traditional dance while allowing it to adapt and thrive in a modern context, ensuring that the wood's profound cultural and artistic value remains a vital part of the performing arts (Di Cosmo 1994).

In this context, wood's role in traditional dance serves as a powerful metaphor for the enduring human-nature relationship, with its functional, symbolic, and sensory contributions creating a symphony of cultural and artistic expression. This paper aims to delve into the cultural and artistic dimensions of wood in Chinese traditional dance, focusing on its historical significance, symbolic meanings, and evolving applications in contemporary practice.

The Symbolic Significance of Wood

Wood holds profound symbolic significance in Chinese culture, often regarded as an emblem of life, growth, and harmony (Xue *et al.* 2024). As an essential component and surrogate of the natural world, wood is a fundamental material for construction, furniture, and tools. It also serves as a key element in cultural and artistic creation. Its unique texture, form, organic beauty, and versatile shapeability properties enable it to play multiple roles in traditional arts.

Wood symbolizes the continuity of life and the cyclicity of nature in Chinese culture (Zou and Bahauddin 2024). Corresponding to the “Wood” element in the time-honored Five Elements theory, it represents the vitality and energy of spring (Kiani and Khakzand 2024). This vivacity is reflected in the growth of trees and the art of dance, where dancers mimic the growth and sway of trees to convey respect for the life force (Chakraborty 2017). In many traditional dances, the movements resonate with the forms of trees, embodying a deep understanding of nature and a strong desire to imitate and empathize with the natural world.

Furthermore, in artistic creation, wood symbolizes harmony and balance. Its flexibility and strength make it an ideal medium for expression, conveying an amalgamation of power and grace in dance. This unity is not only embodied in the dancer’s bodily movements but is also enhanced using wooden props, which increase the expressive power of the dance. For example, the traditional wooden drum is not just a musical instrument but an integral extension and augmentation of the dancer’s emotions. Subtle variations in the drum’s rhythm, intensity, and resonance, combined with dynamic movements during the performance, allow diverse and refined elaborations of inner feelings.

At the same time, wood carries cultural memory and historical heritage, often associated with local sentiment and familial bonds (Cao *et al.* 2024). In many traditional dances, wood as a prop or stage element reflects regional cultural characteristics and conveys respect for ancestors’ wisdom. Thus, wood in dance art is a material manifestation and a repository for spirit and emotion, fully demonstrating its profound significance in Chinese culture.

The Inclusion of Wood in Traditional Dance

In Chinese traditional dance, wooden props are indispensable elements. These props serve practical purposes and enrich the dance with expressive power and cultural significance. Common wooden props such as fans, rods, and stage installations carry specific cultural symbols and emotional expressions, offering a bridge for communication between the dancer and the audience. For example, the wooden fan is a visual decoration and an important carrier of emotional expression. The fan’s opening, closing, swinging, and spinning enhance the dance’s dynamic beauty and convey the dancer’s inner emotions and artistic mood through its unique form and texture (Pan and Alizadeh 2024). Dancers skillfully use the fan to showcase subtle emotional variations, resonating with the audience.

In traditional Chinese dance, wooden props are widely used in performances, embodying rich cultural symbolism and reflecting people’s reverence and love for nature, life, happiness, and cultural traditions (Table 1). These wooden props come in various shapes, such as fan-shaped, tubular, orbicular, and cylindrical. They are closely tied to the cultural characteristics of different ethnic groups and regions, serving as significant carriers of ethnic dance culture.

In the Yunyang Board Dance, for instance, the use of wooden planks reflects not only cultural aspirations for peace and prosperity but also metaphorically emulates the actions of woodworking, such as shaping and balancing, which are integral to Gansu’s rural craftsmanship traditions. The dancers’ movements, involving precise handling and balancing of the planks, mimic the careful labor of wood-workers, symbolizing diligence and harmony with the natural materials of their environment. This connection enriches the dance’s cultural narrative, linking it to the region’s heritage of manual craftsmanship.

Table 1. Wooden Props and Symbolism in Common Chinese Traditional Dances

Dance Name	Wooden Prop	Symbolism	Shape	Ethnic Group	Region
Jiaozhou Yangge Dance ^a	Fans	Communicating the adoration of life, nature and bounteous harvest	Fan-shaped	Han	Shandong
Chopstick Dance	Chopsticks	Connoting the love of life and pursuit of happiness	Long-cylindrical	Mongol	Inner Mongolia
Yunyang Board Dance ^b	Planks	Anticipating good weather, peace of mind and auspicious blessings	Rectangular-tabular	Han	Gansu
Solitaire Dance	Umbrellas	Dispelling diseases and calamities, bestowing a long and healthy life and ensuring favorable weather and a good year for livestock	Domed	Miao	Hunan
Lusheng Dance ^c	Lusheng ^c	Articulating reverence and propitious expectations for nature and life	Tubular	Miao	Guizhou
Reba Drum Dance ^d	Drums and rods	Expressing fear of and dependence on nature and securing protection from the deities	Orbicular-tabular	Tibetan	Tibet
Flower Stick Dance	Sticks	Declaring one's pride in cultural traditions and way of life	Long-cylindrical	Yao	Jiangxi
Yingge Dance ^e	Rods	Conveying the magic of exorcism to bring good luck and smooth sailing	Long-cylindrical	Han	Guangdong
Shoulder Pole Dance	Shoulder poles	Reflecting the diligence and simplicity of the people, and praying for good weather and longevity	Long-cylindrical	Zhuang	Guangxi

^a Jiaozhou is a city in the Shandong Province of China. Yangge means rice cultivation song.

^b Yunyang is a town in Gansu Province.

^c Lusheng is a traditional woodwind musical instrument made of wood or bamboo.

^d According to legend, Reba refers to the name of the Buddhist Master Milarepa, who created the dance to fend off evil spirits.

^e Yingge means hero's song.

Additionally, wood is integral to the stage backdrop and design of traditional dance performances, serving both aesthetic and functional objectives (Fig. 1). Wooden elements, such as carved panels, textured screens, and stylized arches, serve as evocative backdrops, reflecting cultural authenticity while enhancing the thematic depth of the performance. These elements add visual appeal and create an immersive atmosphere that resonates with the natural environment. Wooden stages and associated paraphernalia further contribute to this intricate harmony, with their organic acoustic qualities amplifying the sound of percussive movements like footwork or drumming, thereby intensifying the performance's emotional impact. Traditional dance performances establish an intimate connection

between nature, culture, and art by incorporating wood in varied configurations into stage design. These wooden components and props are not merely decorative but material embodiments of cultural heritage that play a vital role in transmitting traditions and fostering emotive exchanges. Through the thoughtful and holistic integration of wood, the stage becomes a medium that bridges the past and present, enriching the expressive power of the dance and deepening its impact on the audience.



Fig. 1. The diverse designs of wooden stages in different regions of China provide a consonant space and ambiance for the performance of traditional dances. (A) Caotang opera house, Guizhou; (B) Huangyuan opera house, Qinghai; (C) Huguang Hall opera house, Beijing; (D) Liujialong Wanshoutai opera house, Nanjing; and (E) Prince Kung's Palace Museum opera house, Beijing.

The characteristics of the wooden scaffold of a tree are closely related to the movements in dance, with many traditional dances mimicking its forms and growth, reflecting the harmony and unity between nature and dance (Chamba Nana 2024). The rhythmic swaying and bending of the branches as a resonance response to wind, creating the dancing tree phenomenon (Moore and Maguire 2004), has been emulated in choreographic art. Dancers use body language to express the uprightness, flexibility, tenacity, and vitality of trees, showcasing the beauty and power of the natural world characterized by order out of apparent chaos. For example, in some regional dances (Table 1), the dancers' movements imitate the cadenced swaying of trees in the wind, embodying the rhythm and pulse of nature. At the same time, dancers incorporate the flexibility and strength of wooden branches into their movements. This immersion not only reflects an understanding of the elastic and changeable characteristics of wood but also serves as a profound expression of the vicissitude and vigor of life. The persistence and resoluteness of trees in the face of strong winds and other environmental stresses offer excellent traits

for admiration and veneration. Through fluid bodily movements, dancers demonstrate the growth process of woody plants and their dynamic response to nature's forces and adversities, conveying the tenets of respect for life and reverence for nature. This artistic expression enhances the emotional impact of the dance, providing the audience with fodder for deep reflection. Thus, the biophilic arboreal dance can conjure a profound meditation on nature and life.

Challenges and Innovations in Wood's Role in Dance

The integration of wood in traditional dance faces challenges due to the rise of modern materials, including plastics and metals, which are often cheaper and more durable but lack the cultural and sensory richness of wood (Hou *et al.* 2022). This shift has led to a decline in the use of traditional wooden props in some performances, threatening the preservation of cultural heritage (Du 2023). However, contemporary choreographers are addressing these challenges by innovating with wood, combining traditional craftsmanship with modern design techniques. For example, some artists are experimenting with sustainable wooden materials and minimalist designs to create props that resonate with modern audiences while retaining cultural authenticity. These efforts not only safeguard the symbolic and functional roles of wood but also expand its artistic potential, ensuring its relevance in contemporary dance. Future research could explore how these innovations can further bridge traditional and modern dance forms, enhancing the sensory and ecological dimensions of wood in performance.

The Connection between Wood and the Spiritual World

Using wood in different dance genres is not merely a material representation but also a profound metaphorical expression of the spirit (Alvis 2022). As part of the natural world, wood carries rich cultural symbolism, and through their interaction with wood, dancers convey veneration for nature and deep reflection on life. This interaction is a physical movement and a dialogue of the soul, creating an intense cultural resonance. In traditional culture, wood is often seen as an affirmative symbol of life, representing growth, change, cycles, strength, flexibility, and durability. Wooden props, such as fans and rods, are also pivotal in traditional dance, symbolizing harmony with nature and serving as mediums for emotional and cultural expression (Latrell 2008). The wooden rod, in particular, represents strength, resilience, and a deep connection to the earth (Daye 2015). Through these props, the dancers express awe and gratitude toward the bounteous yet capricious natural world. This transmission of strong sentiment and sensation elevates dance from mere performance to a form of spiritual cultivation and inner reflection, allowing the audience to connect with both the art and its deeper cultural roots. Through the thoughtful integration of wood, the stage becomes a bridge between tradition and the present, enriching the expressive power of the dance. As dancers engage intimately with the varied and respected wood qualities in their movements, it is as though they are conversing with nature, feeling the pulsation and progression of life (Kieft 2014).

In the Tibetan Reba Drum Dance, wooden props such as drums and rods are deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual fabric of Tibet (Figs. 2A-E). Rooted in Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the dance uses the drum's circular shape and resonant sound to symbolize the cyclical nature of life and the spiritual connection between humans and the cosmos. The drum's rhythmic beating mirrors the earth's heartbeat, grounding the dancers in their cultural identity and spiritual heritage, while the rods signify stability and strength,

bridging the physical and spiritual realms. The precise choreography, involving synchronized movements with these props, reflects the Tibetan reverence for nature's vitality and their dependence on its abundance, as seen in rituals honoring deities for protection and prosperity. This cultural dialogue, transmitted through the drum's reverberation and the rod's fluid movements, evokes a shared sense of life's interconnectivity, inspiring profound reflection on the natural world among the audience.



Fig. 2. The incorporation of wood in Chinese traditional folk dance, A-E: Tibetan Reba wood drum dance, and F-H: Wooden fan in the Han ethnic Jiaozhou Yangge (rice cultivation dance of Jiaozhou City, Shandong Province).

In contrast, the Jiaozhou Yangge Fan Dance of the Han ethnic group, rooted in Shandong's agricultural heritage, uses the wooden fan to convey themes of prosperity, joy, and communal celebration (Figs. 2F-H). The fan's ethereal lightness and graceful twirling symbolize the fleeting rhythms of life and the beauty of human emotions, connecting to the region's cultural discourse of bountiful harvests and social harmony. The fan's vivid colors and intricate patterns, combined with its opening, closing, and sweeping movements,

capture the subtle transformations of nature—from gentle breezes to swirling gusts—while aligning with emotions such as joy, longing, and reverence. The choreography emphasizes agility and visual storytelling, creating a delicate interplay between movement and emotion that resonates with the audience, celebrating the vibrancy of rural life. Unlike the Reba Dance’s spiritual grounding, the Fan Dance is an exuberant expression of cultural vitality, leaving a lasting impression of human-nature interconnectedness.

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Wood, a surrogate of nature in Chinese traditional dance, is an important carrier of cultural transmission and a key element of artistic expression. Through the analysis of wooden props such as fans and drums, this article reveals the multifaceted role of wood in choreography, emotional expression, and cultural identity, as well as its profound connection with nature and life. Through their variegated interactions with wood, dancers convey reverence for nature and reflections on life, creating a unique cultural resonance. Future research could explore innovative applications of wood in modern dance, such as the use of sustainable materials or designs that emulate woodworking processes, to further integrate traditional and contemporary dance arts. Additionally, investigating the sensory and ecological dimensions of wood in dance could deepen our understanding of its role in fostering human-nature connections, promoting the transmission and development of cultural heritage.

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