

Research on the choreography techniques of the modern ballet Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber

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Abstract

In recent years, the intersection of literature and dance has become a fertile ground for exploration, revealing both similarities and distinctions between these art forms. Notably, numerous literary masterpieces have undergone adaptation into dance dramas, enriching the expressive palette of both literary works and dance performances. One such example is the dance drama "Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber," a contemporary reinterpretation of the classic novel "Dream of the Red Chamber." Through the infusion of modern choreography techniques, this production seamlessly marries ancient literature with contemporary sensibilities, showcasing a blend of historical narrative and modern societal themes. This innovative approach not only imbues the work with a sense of historical continuity but also expands the possibilities for diverse artistic expression, offering audiences a multidimensional experience that bridges the past and present.

Keywords: Modern Ballet Dance, Choreography Techniques

1. Introduction:

Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber was created in 2007 by Chinese ballet choreographer Xiao Suhua and was first performed by Guangdong Ballet. The dance drama is adapted from Dream of the Red Chamber, one of China's four great classic novels. The whole drama focuses on the romantic entanglement between Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai (Bech, 2002). It is presented in various forms such as solo dance, pas de deux, pas de trois, five-person dance, and group dance, with each independent dance segment adding radiance to each other in the holistic drama. The differences between literature and dance in terms of art form, aesthetic characteristics, etc. bring different aesthetic feelings to the audience. The dance drama Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber, which includes the choreographer's thoughts on the basis of the novel Dream of

the Red Chamber, shows disruptive changes in terms of character image and ideas. The feelings of the characters are used to express the appeal, that is, exposing social conflicts and reflecting people's lives.

The dance drama, adapted from "Dream of the Red Chamber," a renowned classic novel in Chinese literature, serves as a rich source for investigating the portrayal of character images and ideas through dance choreography. With a focus on the romantic entanglement between Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, and Xue Baochai, the production presents various dance forms such as solo, pas de deux, pas de trois, and group dances. Each dance segment contributes to the holistic narrative, adding layers of depth and complexity to the characters' emotions and relationships. The differences between literature and dance as art forms, characterized by their respective aesthetic attributes, offer distinct avenues for conveying character emotions and ideas to the audience. Through choreographer Xiao Suhua's interpretation and adaptation of the novel, the dance drama introduces disruptive changes in character portrayal and thematic exploration. By translating the feelings of the characters into expressive movements, the production aims to illuminate social conflicts and reflect the complexities of human experience.

In addition to character portrayal, the study also delves into the choreographic techniques of "alienation" and "parody" employed in the dance drama. These techniques serve as artistic devices for distancing the audience from familiar narrative conventions and inviting critical reflection on societal norms and values. "Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber" showcases choreographic elements that disrupt traditional storytelling conventions, introducing elements of alienation to challenge audience perceptions and provoke thought. Through parody, the production employs humor and irony to critique societal norms and offer alternative perspectives on the characters and their relationships. By examining the choreographic features of "alienation" and "parody" within the context of the dance drama, the study seeks to elucidate how choreographic choices contribute to the overall thematic and aesthetic impact of the production, enhancing audience engagement and critical interpretation.

2. Objective

1. To study the similarities and differences in character image and ideas in dance choreography.
2. To study the choreography features of "alienation" and "parody" in dance drama.
3. Research methods

The ballet Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber was studied using the literature research method and case analysis method on the basis of collection and sorting of relevant literature in this field.

3.1 Document research method

This method entails comprehensive collection and systematic review of relevant literature pertaining to the choreography techniques utilized in the ballet production. Sources include academic journals,

books, articles, and other scholarly publications focused on ballet choreography, modern dance, and adaptations of literary works in dance. Through meticulous examination of existing literature, the researcher gains insights into the theoretical frameworks, historical context, and artistic influences informing the choreographic choices made in "Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber."

3.2 Case analysis method

In addition to document research, the study employs a case analysis approach to delve deeper into the specific choreographic techniques employed in the ballet production. This involves detailed scrutiny and interpretation of the choreographic elements within "Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber," including movement vocabulary, spatial organization, thematic motifs, and stylistic nuances. By closely analyzing individual dance segments and their relationship to the overarching narrative, the researcher seeks to uncover patterns, trends, and innovative approaches in choreography.

Combining these research methods allows for a comprehensive exploration of the choreographic techniques utilized in "Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber." By synthesizing insights from existing literature with in-depth analysis of the ballet production itself, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the artistic vision, creative process, and aesthetic impact of the choreography within this modern ballet adaptation.

4. Results

From the original novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* to the ballet *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*

4.1 The similarities and differences between the personalities of characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*

In *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, the choreographer focuses on Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, Xue Baochai and Grandmother Jia. In the original work *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the social characteristics are mainly the view of men superiority compared to women, absolutism, etc. Jia Baoyu was a direct descendant of the Jia clan among the four major clans. Born with a jade in his mouth, Jia Baoyu was intelligent and good-looking, living in the lap of luxury, on whom the family pinned high hopes. However, Jia Baoyu had a rebellious streak, who abhorred the social system of the time, criticized the so-called right way, and was respectful of women. Lin Daiyu became motherless at a young age, and Grandmother Jia (Jia Baoyu's maternal grandmother) took her in. Lin Daiyu was quick-witted and knowledgeable yet proud and aloof, who was in frail health, depending on the Jia family for a living. She shared Jia Baoyu's rebellion against the social system at that time, and fell in love with Jia Baoyu. She was praised for pursuing personality liberation and supporting the freedom of marriage. However, due to the social system at that time, Lin Daiyu was not married to Jia Baoyu. Lin Daiyu finally died of heartbreak on the night of wedding between Jia Baoyu and Xue Baochai.



Figure 1 The four major characters in Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber

According to the original book, Xue Baochai, who was born into a prominent family, is elegant and graceful, with an unconstrained character. Like Baoyu and Daiyu, she resented the oppressive social system at that time and criticized the autocratic officialdom, but Xue Baochai lacked the courage to rebel. Bound by the secular restraint, she believed that Baoyu should join the dark officialdom replete with autocracy. At the same time, because Xue Baochai followed the social system and become a kind of believer and defender of it, she met the image of women demanded by elders and society in that era, and was considered by the elders to be Jia Baoyu's ideal wife. Grandmother Jia, who was called the "ancestor" in the original Dream of the Red Chamber, is the person with the highest status in the Jia clan, and is also Jia Baoyu's maternal grandmother. She was refined, optimistic, open-minded and kind-hearted. In the original work, Grandmother Jia adores Lin Daiyu, supporting her grandson Jia Baoyu's love with Lin Daiyu, and hoping that Lin Daiyu could become Jia Baoyu's wife.

In the dance drama Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber, choreographer Xiao Suhua still portrays Baoyu as a rebellious person who held fast to his belief. However, unlike the aristocratic son who lived a romantic life according to the original work, Baoyu in the dance drama is a young man living in modern times, with his special status. In the article "Exploration and Innovation in Dance Drama Creation - My Philosophy of Dance Drama", choreographer Xiao Suhua (2014) said that after reading the novel Dream of the Red Chamber, he found that intellectuals who were patriotic and concerned about the people were always suppressed and persecuted. This is one of the reasons for his adaptation of the novel (Xiao Suhua, 2009, p3). According to the original work, Jia Baoyu, a

person with a rebellious spirit who had been oppressed and did not associate with the secular world, eventually perished. However, choreographer Xiao Suhua enabled Jia Baoyu to have a new life in the new era in the dance drama through modern adaptation. In the *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, Jia Baoyu is portrayed as a contemporary intellectual, demonstrating the integrity of intellectuals who hold fast to their own beliefs, and are not afraid of power, and are not swayed by the prevailing thoughts in society. In this sense, the image, character and state of mind of Jia Baoyu in *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber* and the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* coincide.

In dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lin Daiyu is the same as in the original work, falling in love with Baoyu, sharing Baoyu's resistance against feudal society, and also in frail health. However, in the dance drama, Daiyu's actions, such as eloping with Baoyu and having wedding photos taken with Baoyu, show a modern flavor. The images of Xue Baochai and Grandmother Jia in the dance drama are one-sided and stereotyped compared to those in the original work. Baochai and Grandmother Jia are the villains in the dance drama, in which Baochai is not the unrestrained and frank person as in the original work, and Grandmother Jia is a harsh person who tries to have Baoyu (2002) in the palm of her hand. In the dance drama, Grandmother Jia regards Xue Baochai, a traditional woman, as Jia Baoyu's ideal wife, and made repeated efforts to act as a go-between. She also quarterbacked a sham wedding (Xue Baochai, instead of Lin Daiyu, is married to Jia Baoyu). In this process, Grandmother Jia tries to break up Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu who fall in love, that is, they are not allowed to meet in private. While such changes make the characters stereotyped, it better highlights the social forces represented by Baochai and Grandmother Jia oppressing the freedom represented by Baoyu and Daiyu, as well as the harsh living environment of Baoyu and Daiyu.



Figure 2 Grandmother Jia orchestrated a sham wedding in which Xue Baochai replaced Lin Daiyu

4.2 Similarities and differences between Dream of the Red Chamber and Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber in terms of ideas

The Dream of the Red Chamber is marvelous in terms of the portrayal of characters, narrative method, and ideological connotations. In particular, its ideological content has been studied and discussed by scholars since modern times. There are several obvious ideas generally recognized: first, the contempt for the social system and officialdom concept at that time. Second, the unique evaluation and praise of women. Third, treat the lower class people such as servants on an equal footing. These concepts of equality, the pursuit of freedom, respect for women, and liberation of personality are common in modern times, but these were regarded as rebellion at that time and were not tolerated.

As a modern ballet, the dance drama Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber was positioned as “disruptive” at the time of creation. This disruptive significance is manifested in the concept of the dance drama, the character images, and the plot of the dance drama. It shows the idea of the choreographer using the classic to turn the classic upside down, and using the tradition to express the appeal (Lan Yulan, 2014). Although the Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber only includes four characters, its core idea coincides with that of the original novel Dream of the Red Chamber

5. The creative characteristics of “alienation” in Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber

In Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber, the method of “alienation” in Brecht’s creative system was employed for the first time. Alienation results in a distancing effect that defamiliarizes what is familiar and then reacquaints ourselves with it (Siegel, M.B., 2011). Finally, the audience is guided to dynamically think about the plot, pose questions and then look for answers (Schneider, R., Ross, J., & Manning, S., 2020). The dance drama is distinctly “disruptive” in terms of the classic work, the inherent thinking of the audience, and some traditional dance drama works. It better underscores the personal consciousness of the choreographer, and gives a more distinct modern spirit to the work.

5.1 Alienation of space-time boundaries

The Dream of the Red Chamber has been adapted for the stage many times. The Lin Daiyu by the National Ballet of China and the Dream of the Red Chamber by other dance troupes are basically faithful to the original work. In other words, the literary language is recreated for dance drama on the basis of the original work. However, Xiao Suhua’s Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber narrates the story of a contemporary young man playing the role of Jia Baoyu who explains his choice in love and rebellion against the family through the events such as Baoyu being whipped, marriage of Baochai and death of Daiyu, and breakup between Daiyu and Baoyu. It expresses the values of contemporary young people pursuing individuality and self, and defying the authority. Therefore, it occurs across different time and spaces.



The dance drama is positioned as a modern ballet showing the opposition to tradition, and its choreography is similar to that of a fantasy novel. The choreographer put scenarios and elements from different eras in the same scene. Different time and space present a multi-dimensional and well-arranged view of time and space in the *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*. The characters in the dance drama are both familiar and strange to the audience. The names, plot and character settings ring a bell, but the behavior of the characters is different, such as the traditional and elegant women having a lively bullfight dance, the wedding photos of Baoyu and Daiyu, the submachine guns touted by servants attired in ancient costumes... The whole dance drama seems to have an absurd alienation effect, but when these eccentric combinations are presented, the audience feel deeply shocked. For example, Grandmother Jia is dressed as Santa Claus to cheer up Baoyu, who lost Daiyu, and went to great lengths to use all the fun things in the world to make Baoyu happy, including cartoon dolls such as Disney's Roger Rabbit. These modern things were nonexistent more than 200 years ago, but the choreographer added them in a dance drama to serve the plot, and create a alienation effect.

Figure 3 Grandmother Jia dressed as Santa Claus and Baoyu

In the ever-changing space, the choreographer brings the audience into an illusory and unpredictable artistic atmosphere that the audience never know what will happen next. Such artistic atmosphere includes the divorce of what is imagined from real life, the contrast between painful feelings and absurd plot, the emergence of various elements, and the release of inner emotions (Risner, D., & Oliver, W., 2017). These all mirror the problem shown by the dance drama – impetuous mind and

confusion of modern people. It can be said that this work is an attempt to draw on classical work and modern concepts in the form of dance drama.

The choreographer applies modern ideas when choosing the storyline. For example, in the plot of Baoyu being whipped, the original book shows the audience the relationship between orthodoxy and rebellion, the relationship between the legal wife and concubines, and the relationship between the aristocratic offspring and the lower class performers in a large feudal family. However, because many of these plots are divorced from today's real life, the choreographer only keeps the main conflict - the conflict between parents and children, which reflects the troubles of contemporary teenagers in the period of growth. Moreover, other stories also reflect the values of contemporary youth, to a greater or lesser extent.

5.2 Alienation of subconscious choreography

Sigmund Freud divided mental life into three “provinces” – id, ego, superego. Balanced and accurate analysis and processing of these three forms is an important means for the choreographer to present the consciousness of characters in the work (Garafola, L., 2012). The subconsciousness is the level of “id”, and is also an important aspect that dance choreographers focus on in the creative process.

In the plot of the dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, the way to sow the subconscious state is to add the form of “dream”. According to psychoanalysis, dreams are usually the vehicle of presenting and revealing the subconscious (Li Qi, 2011). In this dance drama, “dream” does not appear as a noun but as a verb. At the beginning of the dance drama, when Baoyu dreams about Daiyu and Baochai, the choreographer uses the dance vocabulary of seductive rumba to reflect Baoyu's hot pursuit of young woman subconsciously. In the subsequent bullfight dance with the red cloak, the passion between Baoyu and his beloved woman Daiyu is expressed in an implicit way, which shows Chinese aesthetic charms.

Professor Yu Ping noted that “contemporary artists add their own stance and vision without exception, and even project themselves in their interpretations of classical works” (Yu Ping, 2003). This is exactly the manifestation of the choreographer's subconsciousness in the dance drama. Choreographer Xiao Suhua said that he is a person with a “serious” complex for the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In the *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, as Xiao Suhua said, the actor plays the physical role of Jia Baoyu, while the choreographer plays the mental role of Jia Baoyu (Xiao Suhua, 2014). This shows that the dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber* is an embodiment of the choreographer's subconscious in dance choreography.

Dance vocabulary is only a form of expressing the choreographer's thoughts. Only if the dance choreographer has a burning creative impulse and desire for the dance can the ultimate presentation touch the audience. The subconscious offers an opportunity to stimulate the creative desire of the dance choreographer. Only by understanding what you want to express can you produce excellent works. This is one reason for the success of the dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of*

the Red Chamber. It is because the choreographer knows what he wants to express that the dance can achieve the unity of the inner world and the external world.

5.3 Alienation of dance vocabulary

The Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber is innovative in the dance language. It is not merely to take off pointe shoes, replace the TUTU skirt with fine gauze, or to add the movements of opera and martial arts. Instead, it changes and supplements the traditional ballet vocabulary with modern dance vocabulary on the basis of the plot. Since Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber is a modern dance drama based on ancient literature, modern dance could be used to represent the emotions of contemporary young people in dance vocabulary, and classical dance could be used to narrate ancient story. However, Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber says no to this expedient approach. Instead of displaying dance techniques, the choreographer focuses on using the body language of dancers to express the inner emotions of the character. The dance vocabulary of this drama is diverse, including street dance, modern dance, and folk dance, integrating traditional ballet vocabulary with rich dance vocabulary. This dance vocabulary makes this dance drama both familiar and strange to the audience: It contains the beauty and exquisiteness of ballet, but abandons the stylized part of classical ballet; it shows the free personality of modern dance without adding the aloof and proud part that is often seen in modern dance. Therefore, when the seemingly absurd dance vocabulary far from traditional ballet such as “magnifying glass” and “bullfighting” appears, the audience can see its humanistic tragedy in addition to the sense of absurdity and strangeness. Due to the props and vocabulary unseen in the original novel, the audience has to re-examine the modern ideas and connotations that this dance drama tries to convey, and think that although the current society is free from the oppression of that era, certain confines of thought still persist.

Similarly, the stage music used in Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber is as colorful as the dance vocabulary. While continuing the symphonic music of classical ballet, it adds Slavic music with a Russian flavor and songs of suona horn from Chinese folk music, and even rock music. This practice also departs from traditional ballet (Shasha, 2021).

6. Discussion

“Parody” in Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber

The literary adaptation approach in which the original text is deliberately modified to create a new text is called “parody”. In recent decades, dramas created on the basis of cultural classics in the form of “parody” have emerged on a large-scale, and most of these “run counter to” the original works in terms of plot, character image, and drama theme, and are presented in a rebellious manner. The dance drama Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber employs the technique of “parody” (Yu Ping, 2003). Instead of the traditional method of focusing on description of events, it focuses on shaping stage scenes. The action language does not pursue lyricism in the narrative structure, but harnesses its own image as a material of symbolism and metaphor.

In terms of character image, the protagonists generally have significantly different personalities, while only the parts that the choreographer believes contribute to the development of the plot are kept. It highlights the conflict between Baoyu and the society as well as family at that time about freedom and love, demonstrating the spirit of modern young people who defy setbacks (Lun Bing, 2009). In terms of plot, some plots are widely divergent different from those in the original. For example, “Daiyu Burying Flowers” in the original work is a classic scene that shows Lin Daiyu lamenting the end of spring and burying withered flowers. In the dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, the choreographer presents the scene in which Daiyu died of depression after learning about Baoyu’s mistaken marriage with Baochai, and “Baoyu buried flowers” in a heart-broken manner. While feeling the shock, the audience can also feel the confusion and pain experienced by the modern young people represented by Baoyu (2002) about their choices, and the courage to leave go of the past after setbacks, and face the future life. This adds the ideas of modern people to the plot on the basis of the original work. “Daiyu Burying Flowers” shows the sadness about her own fate according to the original work, while in the dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber*, burying flowers has a broader meaning, such as expectations for the future, confusion and ultimate demise and rebirth.

The *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber* is also a far cry from that of the original. Xiao Suhua. (2009) mentions the original book describes the dissolution of the Jia clan, while the choreographer describes a scene in a humorous way in the dance drama: when the Jia clan was about to fall apart and Baoyu ran away from home, Baochai and Grandmother Jia drowned their sorrows in the mansion, and then discovered the tryst between Baoyu and Daiyu; Grandmother Jia again ordered the servants to break up the two. By this time, Baoyu (2002) awakened and returned to the modern age full of vibrancy, sprinting forward regardless of resistance. Through “parody”, the dance drama *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber* gives a modern new life to the story in the original, which waters down the tragedy in the original work and brings the warm humanistic care.



Figure 3 Xue Baochai and Grandmother Jia drown their sorrows

7. Conclusion

As dance drama becomes more diversified, the audience's appreciation of dance drama is not limited to the technical level. They will see whether a work has social and cultural significance, and perceive the ideas that the choreographer wants to express. The modern ballet *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber* gives a new life to the original in the new era, trying to conceal the tragedy in the original work with the warm human nature, and giving an uplifting power to people. It also conveys the spirit of contemporary young people pursuing self without going with the stream. New ways of thinking and novel choreography techniques used in *Stone in the Sun - Dream of the Red Chamber* have resulted in a dance drama with a sense of history and modern society, opening up new possibility for the diversified development of Chinese dance dramas.

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