# Methodological Reflections on Cross-Cultural Creation between Eastern Aesthetics and Modern Dance

**Hongbao Yu***

*Daqing Normal University, Daqing, Heilongjiang, 163712, China*
**Corresponding author: hongbao99992025@163.com*

***Abstract:*** *The cross-cultural creation between Eastern aesthetics and modern dance has been getting more popular; however, there are no methodological reflections until now. We take the bodily substrate of the core categories of Eastern aesthetics as our entrance for research and study how the bodily episteme was ruptured while encountering the categories such as qiyun, yijing, and liubai with modern dance. Through analyzing the structural tension between the ontology of a modern dance body and the transcendent concept of a body in Eastern aesthetics and the displacement and deformation of categories on migrating across cultures, we reveal that there exists an inner split within the creative methodology (the separation of form from spirit, the contradiction between linear and cyclical time, and the cultural unconscious conflict between geometric and resonant space). To solve these dilemmas, we propose changing from the fusion paradigm to the tension-coexistence paradigm, demonstrating the methodological significance of the negative path, emphasizing the methodological self-awareness and self-criticism of the creative subject. Not about synthesizing the categories, it's about structuring the difference and voids where meaning is generated through cross-cultural creation.*

***Keywords:*** *Eastern aesthetics; modern dance; cross-cultural creation; methodological reflection; body discourse*

## Introduction

The cross-cultural creation between Eastern aesthetics and modern dance is one of the significant aspect of current dance practices; the open concept of the body in modern dance always borrow resources from different cultures. Theoretical discussion about this cross-cultural practice is limited only to the domain of style analysis of works and evaluate their effects with not enough academic scrutiny of the deep methodological problems regarding the creative process. It can't be naturally finished at the experiential level that Eastern aesthetics and modern dance have distinctive bodily epistemes, temporal perception mode and logic of spatial construction. There exist continuous creating latent conflicts during the creation, which existing theoretical discourse doesn't sufficiently explain. We don't intend to offer some operationally applicable schemes or making a critical examination of the methodological premise of cross-cultural creation, but we try to unveil its internal contradictions and epistemological predicament based on which it explores possible paths for paradigm reconstruction.

## 1. Eastern Aesthetic Core Categories and the Body Discourse of Modern Dance

### *1.1 Bodily Translation of Eastern Aesthetic Categories*

Above mentioned key concepts in the Eastern aesthetic tradition (qiyun, yijing, and liubai), although they are pure spiritual metaphysics speculations have a tangible bodily substrate. The generation of these categories come from classical bodily practices. Qi means breath guidance and the circulation and transformation of inner force; yun refers to a sense of rhythm and continuity of bodily movements; yijing relies upon the concrete perception of the mutual interpenetration of the virtual and the actual when one moves through space. There is a rupture of the meaning of these categories trying to enter into the creative system of modern dance between its bodily substrates and the bodily language of dance: the bodily training system of modern dance is based on the logic of muscular exertion and the logic of movement decomposition, treating the body as an analyzable and recomposable material existence; the mode of bodily experience that depends on the Eastern aesthetic categories is completely

another kind of bodily episteme – regarding the body as a responsive existence connected with cosmic rhythms[1].

The technical discrepancy, however, exists between both of these bodily epistemologies; yet they differ ontologically for two different notions of the body: The body discourse of modern dance requires that the subject dominates their object (body is an object to manipulate), while the bodily experience of Eastern aesthetics requires a dissolution of the subject into the natural operation and transformation of the body. Choreographers wishing to communicate Eastern aesthetic categories through the bodily techniques of modern dance dismantle the condition of bodily experience upon which those categories are valid – the operational logic of technique. As we lose the intrinsic isomorphic relationship with the bodily experience when our category's embodied vehicle migrates across languages, we change the category from experientiable bodily existence to identifying stylized sign.

### *1.2 The Ontological Predicament of the Body in Modern Dance Methodology*

From its very birth, modern dance attempted to define the ontological status of the body – the body can't be for something else than itself, it must be a self-sufficient field of meaningful production. This is the basic assumption behind modern dance methodology: choreography is an exploration into the body's own possibilities. An intervention from Eastern aesthetics onto this ontological presupposition reveals a deep predicament in modern dance methodology. There was no such thing as self-sufficiency regarding the understanding of the body in Eastern aesthetics; the body is always related to cosmic rhythms, natural emergence and the transcendental aspect of inner cultivation." Qiyun shengdong", doesn't describe the state of the body, but rather the generative process of responsive communication between the body and everything in heaven and earth[2]

Hence, the "body itself" of modern dance opposes the "beyond the body" of Eastern aesthetics; this embodies a fundamental aporia in creative methodology. Adhering to the body-ontological view of modern dance makes our incapacity to accommodate the transcendent dimension of Eastern aesthetics. Attempting to include the transcendent dimension of Eastern aesthetics necessarily breaches the ontological self-sufficiency of the body by bringing down the body as a vehicle of external ideas. Both of them make us fall into methodological predicaments – the first reduces Eastern aesthetics just to a decorative appendage to the body whereas the second brings modern dance back to its expressive mode which it once opposed. The origin of such a predicament rests upon the fact that both conceptions of the body are incommensurable on the ontological level. What we confront here in cross-cultural creation is not a technical issue but a philosophical one.

### *1.3 Displacement and Deformation of Aesthetic Categories in Cross-Cultural Creation*

The appropriation of Eastern aesthetic categories in creating modern dance does not result in fusion/dialogue according to theory, but instead results in displacement/deformation of categories. Displacement means extracting categories out of their original cultural-bodily context and putting them into a heterogeneous creative system; Deformation is about semantic re-organization/structure transformation of categories when migrating. First-level displacement: Reorganization of semantic hierarchy of categories. For instance, taking qiyun for example, originally it has all three inseparable dimensions at the same time – the material, the spiritual, and the cosmological. After being introduced into modern dance creation, its material dimension amplifies itself into breathing technique, its spiritual dimension turns into a vague Eastern atmosphere, while its cosmological dimension almost disappears completely. Second-level: The rupture of relation with the category system. According to the internal logic of Eastern aesthetics, there exists a mutual definition network among qiyun, yijing, liubai, etc., which will be lost once these categories get extracted alone. Qiyun loses its definition by other categories and gets re-defined by modern dance's own conceptual tools.

We showed how cross-cultural creation is an unequal exchange of categories but a process of meaning production full of asymmetry. Displacement and deformation don't signify any type of loss, it is the fate which inevitably happens when categories enter into a heterogeneous context. Reflection starts with methodological self-awareness about its inevitability: If we know that displacement and deformation are inevitable then what can be done now? We cannot prevent this anymore so let us try to interpret the mechanism of meaning generation in cross-cultural creation on basis of our acknowledgement of its inevitability. Displacement of categories does not mean impossibility for cross-cultural creation – it requires the creative subject (on the premise of clear recognition of such structure) to reexamine the essence of their own work[3].

## 2. Internal Splits in Creative Methodology and Their Epistemological Roots

### *2.1 The Predicament of Formal Borrowing and the Stripping Away of the Spiritual Core*

Most popular approach for cross-cultural creation involves stripping out visualizable elements of Eastern art forms and incorporating them into the choreographic vocabulary of modern dance. Linearity of calligraphic brushstrokes; various layers of ink wash rendering; rhythmical cadence of theatrical body movement became favored due to its unique recognizability. The core issue revealed by such an operation resides on the fact that if form is stripped away from the aesthetic-spiritual soil which brought forth it degenerates as empty stylized decoration. Stripping away isn't a shortcoming regarding technical execution but a structural fault of the methodology – assuming the separability between form and spirit whereas running directly opposite with the holistic logic of Eastern aesthetics. For Eastern aesthetics' internal reasoning there is no dissectible binary relationship between form and spirit: Brushstrokes are not just visual morphology of lines, they are at the same time the externalization of bodily breath, cultivation of mind and nature and cosmic resonance.

It's a mutual deadlock: the more faithful are we to formalities – the further do we drift away from the spiritual essence which cannot be perfectly reproduced without carrying with it the bodily and mental conditions of its generation (precision exaggerates hollowing out of form); the more pursue we convey spirit – the less have we an operative bodily path as spirit is not extractable outside of form but a generative effect immanent within particular formal practices. This deadlock stems from the fact that for cross-cultural creation there has to be a possibility of translation of Eastern aesthetics into the language of modern dance which requires an extractable "content", a replaceable "form". Holistic aesthetic system makes such a binary division invalid thus any methodology based on an invalid presupposition will end up falling into the predicament of self-dissolution[4].

### *2.2 Deep Contradiction in Modes of Temporal Perception*

Bodily temporality of modern dance was based on linear narrative and rhythmic division of time under framework of Western modernity; it implies a diachrony: beginning, development, climax and ending. In even anti-narrative postmodern dance there is a predictable sequence for the process of movements. Perception of time in Eastern aesthetics shows cyclical, spiraling and generative character with recurrence, circular movement and duration as typical forms. Concept of "recurrence", which means time flows in no one direction, returning cyclically, every return is not only repetition but renewal within difference, this view of time negates the priority of the endpoint over the starting point or the dominance of the climax over preparation.

This collision of these two kinds of temporal perceptions in creative methodology is not complementarity – it is contradiction by using a linearly developing bodily sequence to transport a cyclical-generative temporal consciousness brings us into an irreconcilable contradiction methodologically. A need for each movement to point toward the next movement (meaning is constantly pointed out, converging at the climax node), from linear sequence contradicts with a need for each movement containing all its own meaning without external pointing, only through internal spiraling and deepening from cyclical generation. This contradiction appears in choreography when we find difficulty in handling rhythm—handling rhythm according to the rhythmic logic of modern dance cuts up the temporal characteristics of the East into regular beats, totally lose the sense of cyclicality; if we try to be faithful to cyclical time, our choreographic structure lacks the necessary impetus for modern dance. Because of the incommensurability of temporal perception, any cross-cultural creation in the temporal dimension will inevitably pay the price of one side's temporal logic - but whether or not it is worth the price to pay depends on how clearly the creative subject understands this contradiction.

### *2.3 Cultural Unconscious Conflict in the Logic of Spatial Construction*

Great influence in the spatial conception of modern dance comes from the Western tradition of geometric perspective and proscenium stage structure: emphasis on quantifying space, visual balance and focus. Two prescriptions exist about movement through space by the body -- one from mechanics and another from vision. The spatial arrangement depends on geometric configuration; the group dance formation leans towards symmetry or golden ratio proportion; blank spaces were seen as residual zone. We have a completely different understanding of space in Eastern aesthetics. Scattered-point perspective eliminates the dominance of a single focal point; the liubai structure makes blank space

become a productive space which has positive meaning; mutual interpenetration of the virtual and the actual means that the actual places of space are permeated with the virtual while the virtual places are pregnant with the actual. Space is not any more an objective container for the body, it becomes a field of sympathy and resonance between the body and the cosmos[5].

The two spatial logics stem out of their own cultural unconsciousnesses creating latent conflicts on the concrete operational level of choreography. They don't appear in form of conceptual oppositions, they cause an uncomfortable feeling at the level of bodily intuition: "Does this feel comfortable?", "Does walking this way feel natural?". For instance taking group dance arrangement for example, if you use spatial division based on the geometric tradition, every dancer has a determinate coordinate position in different functional zones, but the Eastern spatial logic prefers a blurred distribution of fields (the position is no longer a coordinate point, it becomes a resonant node inside a force field) and meaning comes forth via virtual connective relationships with other nodes. The difference affects the choreographer's intuitive judgment – a choreographer trained by the Western spatial logic unconsciously seeks symmetry and balance, while the Eastern spatial logic demands that the flow of qi channels and the resonance between the virtual and the actual are realized. Inconspicuous conflicts mark the very beginning of our methodological reflections. By raising the cultural unconscious up to the level of consciousness we will transform the conflict from intuitive discomfort into a self-aware methodological choice.

## 3. Paradigm Reconstruction of Cross-Cultural Creative Methodology

### *3.1 The Paradigm Shift from Binary Fusion to Tension Coexistence*

The fusion paradigm has always ruled over the methodology for cross-cultural creation. We assume that there exists an intermediary where Eastern aesthetics and modern dance will organically unite with each other. Under such paradigm, choreographers have to find out the common ground between the two aesthetic systems, and build up a new creative language on it. From what we saw in our analysis in the previous two chapters, the two aesthetics are incomprehensible in terms of their conception of bodies, perception of time, and logic of space; therefore they cannot be resolved by searching for the common ground. At the core of the problem of the fusion paradigm lies the falsity of its epistemology – it assumes differences could be synthesized, which has never been adequately explored. A methodology based upon a false premise can never resolve its own contradictions no matter how refined the operations may be.

Thus we propose another possibility – tension-coexistence paradigm: acknowledging irreducibility of both aesthetics logics and seeing tension as the main driver in creation instead of an obstacle; choreographers do not attempt to eradicate differences but they can create conditions where differences could emerge and stay different. Conflict changes from solving to working with (tension coexistence) creating focuses on how what cannot be fused can coexist unfusably. Epistemologically it goes from finding common ground to keeping differences providing a new theoretical space for the methodology of cross-cultural creation.

### *3.2 The Methodological Significance of the Negative Path*

In contrast to the above-mentioned positive methodology, which prevails in cross-cultural creation, there is a reverse direction of thought – the negative path: not passive negation, but systematically suspend the immediate presentation of Eastern aesthetic categories for creating the structure of absence and non-presence by introducing Eastern aesthetics into creation negatively; its theory's foundation is based on the fact that the logic of "the virtual and the actual generating each other" (treat blank as black), in Eastern aesthetics itself contains a negative operation, i.e., realized via the absence of form, blank space itself becomes one of the modes of producing meaning. Negative path is not imposed externally, it is structural homology with the internal logic of Eastern aesthetics[6].

Negative path bypasses the dilemma of formal borrowing by removing the spiritual core using echo instead of applying Eastern aesthetics. Echo doesn't require any sign of style; it evokes implied change in structure of bodily perception. Choreographers don't present explicit Eastern aesthetic symbols creating a perceptual situation due to lack of Eastern aesthetics which creates a perceptible structural void. It uses the same aesthetic logic as liubai – the very void is an event of meaning. A new way of generation of meaning in cross-cultural creation: it is generated via structural construction of the void

(instead of superposition and fusion)

### *3.3 Methodological Self-Awareness and the Self-Criticism of the Creative Subject*

Reflections on method in cross-cultural creation lead us back to the creative subject. Methodology can never be discovered as an operating manual but as a cultural tendency in the subject's cognitive structure. A cross-cultural creative subject faces a double predicament – either they totally get rid of the aesthetic presuppositions and bodily habitus that are part of their own cultural identity which unconsciously determine creative judgments or they avoid the cognitive disturbance from the otherness of another culture's aesthetics (perhaps inspiring new creative possibilities or causing creative disorder). The creative subject is not a neutral operator, it is a field permeated by different cultural forces where each creative choice manifesting and reaffirming cultural identity.

Methodology of self-awareness implies having clear awareness of that condition and constant criticism – rather than transcending limitations of cultural identity, we use those as raw material in our creative reflections. Core of methodological self-awareness is subject's awareness of his/her unconscious choices – explore the cultural logic and bodily memory hidden under a certain way of handling. Self-criticism is not about denying cultural identity; it reveals its operation. Only we have a chance at all to change ourselves from being a passive cultural executor to an active methodological constructor weighting and choosing between her own cultural tendencies and the differences of another culture if we raise our unconscious cultural tendencies up to the level of consciousness.

## Conclusion

Through analysis on the ontological predicament of the body, separation of form from spirit, contradiction of temporal perception and conflict in spatial logic, I expose the structural issues met with cross-cultural creation between Eastern aesthetics and modern dance at the methodological level. An inherent problem at the level of epistemology of the fusion paradigm which dominates cross-cultural creation is assumed the commensurability between the two aesthetic logics but there are indeed irreducible differences in core aspects (bodily conception, temporal consciousness, spatial perception), thus proposing a new methodological conception—tension-coexistence paradigm, demonstrating its unique value in solving the predicament of formal borrowing and separation of form from spirit, emphasizing the methodological self-awareness and self-criticism of the creative subject as the fundamental premise for cross-cultural creation to be truly self-aware.

Allows us to move from how to better fuse towards the conditions for meaning generation based upon acknowledging incommensurability, reflecting on methodology regarding cross-cultural creation; it may be tested/revised through specific creative processes or exploring the theoretical path of this study within the larger horizon of cross-cultural aesthetics (exploring the general theoretical significance outside the category of dance art). Reflections about methodology of cross-cultural creation is not something we do once and for all – rather constantly advancing by means of constant theoretical examination and creative practice.

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