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On the Formal Function of "Urban Dance" from the Perspective of Sociological Aesthetics

-- A Comparative Study of Song-dynasty Folk Dance Troupes and Contemporary Chinese Square Dancing

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Abstract: As a persistent form of socio-cultural expression, urban dance is deeply rooted in the lived experience of ordinary people and has gradually evolved distinctive formal characteristics. Examined through the lens of sociological aesthetics, a comparative analysis of folk dance troupes in the Song dynasty and contemporary Chinese square dancing reveals the functional continuity of urban dance across historical periods. Dance functions as a principal medium through which its internal content and structure are articulated, while simultaneously carrying significant social meanings: it enables public participation, facilitates interpersonal interaction, and contributes to the construction of collective and individual identities. Within the context of the aestheticization of everyday life, the sensory experiences of countless individuals collectively constitute the contemporary social fabric. By interrogating such individual experiences, one may discern that both the folk dance troupes of the Song era and today's square dances served, in their respective times, as vital means for social formation—indeed, as embodiments of society itself.

Keywords: Urban Dance; Sociological Aesthetics; Song-Dynasty Folk Dance Troupes; Chinese Square Dance.

1. Introduction

From ancient times to the present, dance has flourished in the fertile soil of urban society, remaining closely intertwined with the quotidian experiences of the populace. When dance is approached as a social and urban cultural practice, it becomes evident that—even across vast historical intervals—its social and aesthetic functions exhibit striking continuities. It is precisely by examining these continuities that one may transcend the limitations of narrowly period-specific discussions and establish a more panoramic and dialectical understanding of both history and the present. Such a perspective enables a more profound appreciation of dance itself and a subtler evaluation of its genuine significance for human society. This paper focuses on two representative forms of urban dance: the folk dance troupes of the Song dynasty and contemporary Chinese square dancing. Both forms are intricately connected with urban culture. By employing the theoretical framework of sociological aesthetics, this study seeks to correlate the formal and functional dimensions of urban dance, exploring the shared cultural values and social meanings these two historically distant yet structurally akin practices confer upon the city and its inhabitants.

2. Dance in the Urban Context: The Comparative Background of Song-dynasty folk dance troupes and Contemporary Square Dancing

With the abolition of the *fangshi* (ward-and-market) system during the Song dynasty, its urban configuration underwent a profound transformation: commercial and residential districts became increasingly intertwined, and freer, more expansive public spaces emerged within the daily lives of the populace [1]. This spatial reorganization exerted a considerable influence on the cultural life of dance. Streets and alleys intersected in intricate networks, and even square-like open areas appeared, accommodating dense pedestrian flows and thereby offering ideal venues for diverse performative activities. Among these, the dance troupes represented a prominent form of popular dance in the Song period. Their performances were often staged in venues such as theaters or teahouses and taverns, yet this study focuses on another performative site—the streets and alleys—where such troupes also thrived. This spatial dimension corresponds closely to the modern phenomenon of square dancing. Unlike performances held in commercial venues, the street-based folk troupes were largely spontaneous and community-driven. Organized by various urban guilds and occupational associations, citizens took to the streets to engage in performances that fused music, dance, and acrobatic arts, thereby fulfilling both the recreational and social needs of everyday urban life.

In contemporary China, the concept of *urban dance*—alongside that of *social dance*—was formally articulated in 1987 during the First National Seminar on Mass Dance Creation. At this event, choreographers innovatively proposed the term *social dance* as a general category encompassing all mass-participatory dance forms. The same year, essays on this topic were published in *Collected Papers on Mass Dance*, marking the earliest theoretical and practical explorations of such genre. Within this framework, *urban dance* constitutes a more specific manifestation of *social dance*. Sharing the former's same characteristics, it involves participants from all walks of life, develops around diverse social relationships, and emphasizes spontaneity, collectivity, and participation as defining traits. Furthermore, urban dance has transcended the traditional stage to inhabit open, plaza-oriented spaces. The present study takes as its empirical focus two representative sites in Beijing—The Purple Bamboo Park and Ditan Park—where square dancing activities have

become integral to the urban rhythm. The dance practices observed in these spaces incorporate elements of folk dance and popular music, and are predominantly performed by middle-aged and elderly participants (roughly between their fifties and seventies). The activities are collectively organized, with solo performances being rare.

In sum, both the folk dance troupes of the Song dynasty and contemporary Chinese square dancing conform, to a significant degree, to the conceptual framework of *urban dance*. In both cases, dance activities unfold within the urban environment and are enacted by the common people rather than the professional. Both forms are characterized by mass participation, collective entertainment, and thematic grounding in the lived realities of their time and place. Thus, Song-dynasty folk dance troupes and present-day square dancing may legitimately be situated within a shared context of urban dance, inviting further comparative inquiry into their respective aesthetic forms and social functions

3. The First Functional Value of Form: Form as the Structural Expression of Content

The discussion of the functional value of *urban dan*ce from the perspective of *form* originates from Georg Simmel's theoretical framework. He regarded society itself as a work of art, approaching social reality through an aesthetic gaze and interpreting social phenomena by means of aesthetic thought. Within this interpretive model, *form* becomes both the point of departure and the conceptual core for understanding cultural phenomena. As a structural element that manifests content, form—in its narrower sense—refers to a relatively stable correspondence between external configuration and internal meaning. When form is thus conceived as a structural medium for presenting both Song-dynasty folk dance troupes and contemporary square dancing, an analysis that proceeds from form provides a primary avenue for discerning the similarities and differences between these two types of urban dance.

To describe the *formal characteristics* of Song-dynasty folk dance troupes, it is most appropriate to turn to contemporaneous literary and historical accounts. Numerous Song texts contain detailed records of popular dance troupes. For example, *Xihu Laoren Fansheng Lu* (An Old Resident's Record of the Flourishing Scenery of the West Lake) notes: " The *Baolao* (a type of comic masked dance or clown performance) troupe of Fujian numbers over three hundred members, while the troupe from Sichuan counts over one hundred." [2] This passage vividly illustrates how, exemplified by the *Baolao* performances, dance troupes in Song cities were organized through guilds and occupational associations, involving large numbers of participants across trades.

Another well-known dance program was *Pu Hudie* (Catching Butterflies), which depicted scenes from children's play. The performance featured a group of girls holding fans, while a boy, wielding a slender rattan stick with a paper butterfly attached, made the " butterfly " flutter and circle in the air. The girls chased and danced around it, creating a lively tableau suffused with everyday vitality. Similarly, the *Zhuma'er* (Bamboo Horse Dance) employed props resembling horse figures fastened around the dancers' waists, divided into head and tail sections so that the performers appeared to ride galloping horses, singing and dancing in unison.

From these examples, we may discern three structural elements constituting the *formal system*of Song folk dance troupes. First, the collective nature of participation—large groups gathered to perform a unified program. Second, the presence of *dynamic imagery*: motifs such as butterflies or bamboo horses embodied movement, and human actions were choreographed to animate these symbolic forms. Third, the frequent use of *props* in performance, through which material objects mediated and externalized emotional expression.

Turning to the *internal formal structure* of contemporary square dancing, field observations conducted in Beijing's Purple Bamboo Park and Ditan Park reveal comparable organizational patterns. For instance, the *Red Fan Dance* performed at the Purple Bamboo Park involves twelve participants, each holding a long red fan. The movements are expansive and fluid, the rhythm moderate, and the accompanying music grand and melodious—collectively producing an image of positive communal energy. Another example, the *Chorus Accompanied Group Dance* in the same park, usually consists of twenty to thirty dancers without props. Its movement vocabulary draws on elements from traditional folk and ethnic dance styles, while the music—often adapted from popular folk songs—guides rhythmic variations and spatial transitions throughout the choreography. Overall, the formal characteristics of these square-dance performances exhibit several shared structural features: large group participation, occasional use of props, and movements that emphasize fluidity and expressive resonance.

4. The Second Functional Value of Form: Form as the Framework that Bears Meaning

In Simmel's theoretical system, the concept of *form* is endowed with great richness. Form is the external framework that carries *life*; it exists in all things—whether in morality, art, or social life—and it is form that allows each entity to become what it is [3]. Only when we extract form from the undifferentiated totality of existence do things reveal their distinctive essence. When form presents itself as such a vital framework and is apprehended as such, it acquires a kind of primacy: it assumes the responsibility of social communication and becomes the point of departure for aesthetic reflection within society. Form, by virtue of its objectivity, enables us to observe and contemplate life through artistic modalities; in this sense, it becomes one of the essential means by which life is organized and comprehended. When we speak of *image* or *figuration* as an abstract bearer of meaning, its referent often remains elusive. In the author's understanding, this external framework—form as that which carries life—represents the meaning generated precisely through the existence of form itself. Given the focus of this study on the urban as a spatial and social category, this meaning extends in two directions: first, toward the significance of dance form for its participants; and second, toward the significance of dance form for the city and for society as a whole.

4.1. Form as a Medium of Social Participation

Whether in the folk dance troupes of the Song dynasty or in today's square dancing, the very *existence* of form constitutes an active possibility for social participation. During the Song dynasty, commercial prosperity flourished as

the collapse of the *fangshi* system allowed trade to flow freely through streets and alleys, accelerating economic growth and giving rise to an urban scale comparable to what we now call the "city." Folk dance troupes emerged within this vibrant urban milieu and, in turn, helped shape and enrich it. Dance, as a socio-cultural form, thus entered directly into the processes of social construction—a quintessential example of art participating in society.

Moreover, the liberation from the constraints of *ya* (the refined or courtly) offered the populace new opportunities for social engagement. In artistic terms, the center of Chinese dance culture during the Song period shifted from the imperial court to the common people. The court favored *troupe dances* characterized by rigorous formalism and codified patterns—features that ensured aesthetic completeness but stifled spontaneity and authentic emotion. Folk dance troupes, by contrast, embodied natural joy and emotional immediacy; through dance, ordinary people found a mode of participating in their own lives and in the life of the city.

In modern society, defined by ceaseless progress and mobility, to cease moving is to risk estrangement from the social flow; development itself threatens to deprive the stationary individual of participation. Yet, square dancing in public parks offers precisely such individuals—often the retired or less mobile—a renewed avenue for engagement. It satisfies the enduring human need for belonging, re-establishing a dynamic equilibrium between movement and stillness, change and continuity, individual and community.

4.2. Form as a Medium of Social Interaction

Sociological aesthetics attributes aesthetic significance to society as a whole, locating this meaning most concretely within the *forms of social interaction*. Both the Song-dynasty folk dance troupes and contemporary square dancing exemplify this principle: each manifests, in different historical contexts, the function of social interaction through collective participation. In the Song period, a single folk dance troupe could comprise over three hundred members; even today, square dancing rarely involves fewer than two participants. The group itself thus becomes both the most immediate visual manifestation of folk dance and the most direct means through which participants encounter one another. Such interaction constitutes a *self-sustaining social circuit*, governed by internal norms that require no external enforcement. As Simmel observed, "sociability is a world within the world, possessing its own autonomous rules."[4] Folk dance—whether in the Song dynasty or the present—embodies precisely such a rule-bound yet self-generating microcosm of sociability: a form that continuously produces social effects and influences every participant involved.

4.3. Form as a Vehicle of Identity Formation

Participation in form enables the construction of collective and individual identity. Through physical interaction and shared rhythm, participants in dance locate themselves within a larger social body. In both the Song-dynasty folk troupes and contemporary square dancing, participation arises from voluntary and spontaneous activity. In the case of the Song troupes, the use of props and role-playing not only structured performance but also reinforced performers' identification with their enacted roles. The self-organized nature of these troupes made them easily recognizable to outsiders, establishing a distinct collective identity. On a narrow social level, this identity could be traced to guild or occupational affiliations, functioning as small yet orderly social units within the city. On a broader cultural level, however, the identity of the folk dance troupe represented a non-elite, non-courtly cultural form—a *popular* counterpoint to aristocratic aesthetics.

In the modern context of square dancing, identity no longer derives from specific roles but from relations among people. Participants draw closer to one another within the same social group, affirming selfhood through recognition, differentiation, and mutual belonging. The continuity and regularity of square dancing—its repetition at fixed times and places—stand in poignant contrast to the fluid temporality of modern life. Through the processes of learning, teaching, and imitation, participants experience support and dissolve the isolation of the individual self, thereby reintegrating into a shared collective identity. Simmel conceived society as "the unity of interacting individuals." [5] From this perspective, the form of square dancing embodies an ongoing dialectic of individual interaction and collective unity—an aesthetic manifestation of social cohesion itself.[6]

5. Conclusion

The exploration of the functional forms of Song-dynasty folk dance troupes and contemporary square dances ultimately leads us to another dimension of inquiry—the content-oriented function that coexists with their formal values. As a social and cultural form, dance naturally embodies a certain content value, which may be discerned through the lens of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic function, belonging to the inner domain of artistic and cultural phenomena, rests upon the foundation of urban everyday life. Within the context of the aestheticization of daily life, aesthetic activity no longer refers merely to isolated forms or content, but rather integrates the totality of existence into a unified perceptual experience. From this holistic mode of perception arises a distinct aesthetic significance—one that emphasizes the individualized sensibility of each participant, and regards the world and society as woven from the fabric of personal feeling.

On this premise, the content function of the Song-dynasty folk dance troupes may be reinterpreted. The dancers inevitably experienced emotional resonances prior to and during their performances; these inner sensibilities were then externalized through bodily movement. Hence, the "jubilation" frequently described in historical records represents not merely collective festivity but the crystallization of countless fragments of liberated emotion—ephemeral moments of affective release that, even across centuries, invite our empathetic understanding. Could such an affective reconstruction of vanished history offer a new pathway for contemplating the aesthetics of ancient Chinese dance? Whether in the past or present, dance as a living cultural form remains grounded in urban experience, bearing analogous formal functions and aesthetic values across time. Its essential nature—expressive, emotional, and communicative—has never been altered by temporal or spatial shifts. Dance is both *eternal* and *of the people*; it evolves continuously through the chronicles of successive societies, to be reinterpreted and renewed by each generation in its own manner.

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