



ANTON BRUCKNER
PRIVATUNIVERSITÄT
OBERÖSTERREICH

Jiaji Cheng B.A.

Matrikelnummer: 62103463

The Interaction and Practice of “Circle” in Dance Creation under Trans-cultural Thresholds

Masterarbeit

KMA Wissenschaftliche Arbeit

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades

Master of Arts

des Studiums: Movement Research

Studienkennzahl: RA 066 767

an der

Anton Bruckner Privatuniversität

Betreut durch: Univ. Prof. Mag. Rosemarie Breuss-Bochdansky

Zweitleser*in: Constantin Georgescu M.A.

Linz 09.2024

Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of the circle and its reconstruction in dance creation under a trans-cultural context. By analyzing how the circle has integrated with human culture from dimensions such as philosophy, geometry, and semiotics, this study reveals that it bears broad symbolic meanings and forms a bridge in cultural exchange. Specific case studies of Sufi Whirling and Chinese classical dance demonstrate practical applications and aesthetic shaping of the circle within different cultural frameworks. The personal creative exploration developed in this thesis shows the circle's wide effect in the dance creation process. The circle is a medium for formal elements and trans-culture, which fosters artistic creation and interaction within different cultural backgrounds. This article underlines the indispensable role in the circle of trans-cultural artistic creation and gives specific practical methods and research references for dance creators.

Table of contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
1. “Circle” as a Starting Point	6
1.1 <i>The Circle as a Universal Entity</i>	<i>9</i>
1.2 <i>Circular Awareness Activities</i>	<i>12</i>
1.3 <i>Circular symbols and embodies interpretations.....</i>	<i>18</i>
1.4 <i>Within the Circles</i>	<i>23</i>
2. The Integration of the “Circle” and Dance.....	25
2.1 <i>The Circle in Sufi Whirling</i>	<i>26</i>
2.2 <i>The Circle in Chinese Classical Dance</i>	<i>29</i>
2.3 <i>Comparative Analysis and Reflections</i>	<i>35</i>
3. Creating within the “Circle”	36
3.1 <i>Circle Movement</i>	<i>40</i>
3.2 <i>Case Study: Axis.....</i>	<i>50</i>
Conclusion.....	56
Bibliography	59
Image collections.....	61

Introduction

In today's accelerated globalization process, dance has played an important role in trans-cultural communication and has demonstrated unprecedented diversity and integration. The rise in frequency of transculturality leads to mutual collisions and fusions of artistic elements from one culture to another, giving way to new artistic forms and creative concepts. The circle forms part of world recognition as a geometric shape and a cultural symbol valued in cultural tradition and artistic creation. In dance, "circle" means so much more than the form of bodily movement; it represents an aesthetic shape that carries within itself the density of cultural meanings and shows an artist's discovery of the world in the expression of cultural heritage.

Dance is not a product of a one-time performance; it goes through conception, choreography, and performance. It is an art form that prevails beyond the surface of space and time in any performance. Its productivity and continuity are embodied in the process of creation and performance, as well as in cultural transmission, social interaction, educational training, and connection to daily life. In *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Foster introduced post-structuralism into dance studies, broadening the scope of research to include the production process of dance works. Foster (1986) writes, "The self is not a natural or fixed entity but rather a process constituted by various cultural and historical circumstances" (p.236). This perspective then criticizes the traditional paradigm of a self and takes an alternative route to the experience of subjectivity in making dance.

From a post-structuralist perspective, the significance of the circle as a symbol in dance is not fixed or stable; it is ever evolving through diversities of cultural contexts, historical conjunctures, and audience perceptions. While in some cultures, a circle might stand for harmony and completeness, in other circles, it could mean reverence for divinity in a religious context. Also, these symbolic meanings do not exist in isolation-they interlink

through choreography and the bodily expressions of the dancers using multiple interpretations by the audience. This “denaturalized” notion of subjectivity helps us understand dynamic processes within dance creation where each participant’s “self” is produced and reproduced within cultural and historical contexts.

The open nature of this vision makes dance go across cultural borders, where cultures meet and exchange. Research on transcultural integration and the practice of the circle as a symbol in dance creation helps to deeply grasp different cultures’ characteristics. It offers new ideas and methods for creation. During my master’s studies, I started a practice-based inquiry based on the “circle,” which approached thematic intention, spatial concepts, and personal bodily archives. In this process, the circle, as one of the contents of dance movements and creative structure, moves me through my imagination concerning trans-cultural creation in an encompassing artistic act. However, this research took the challenge of fusing the circle with dance dynamics from a transcultural perspective as the medium between cultural co-existence and artistic creation. Thus, it shall specifically answer these key questions:

- How is the “circle” understood, and how does it directly or indirectly influence human activities?
- What are the historical origins and impacts of integrating the “circle” with dance forms in specific cultural contexts?
- How can this knowledge of the “circle” be applied in trans-cultural bodily practices and the construction of artistic works in dance creation?

With the backing of literature, case studies, and research in artistic practices, this study analyzes the growth, modes of expression, symbolic meaning, and use of the circle in dance under diverse cultural expressions and traditions. The paper proceeds through an inquiry based on the post-structuralist method to explore how, as a complex cultural sign, the circle fosters dialogue and mixing between cultures. This research investigates dance as a space of expression and representation of multiple cultural identities by examining the use of the

circle in choreography and rehearsal, showing how dancers are in continuous transformation and expression of themselves. It brings to light how the symbol constructs subjectivities in trans-cultural dance creation.

This thesis is structured around three major parts, gradually unfolding the research following the creative process. The universally accepted circle symbol was introduced in the first chapter, and the symbolic meanings found in different cultures were discussed. In this part of the dissertation, an effort is made to present a thorough analysis of the philosophical connotations and the historical evolution of the circle in Eastern and Western cultures while referring to how the circle was endowed with symbolic meanings in various civilizations. The study shows how powerful and representative of human behavior and ideologies these symbols are by comparing circular symbols across cultures. The second chapter focuses on using the circle in dance, specifically in various cultural dance forms. For this purpose, this chapter introduces, with the aid of two case studies, namely Sufi Whirling and Chinese classical dance, the symbolic function and actual application of the circle in these two disparate dances. From this point of view, the chapter also illustrates the trans-cultural universality and intrinsic potential that circle practices bestow on bodily practice and dancing. The third chapter describes how the circle concept can be incorporated into bodily practice and dance creation. Through improvisational dance and movement experiments, the research looks at the multiple manifestations of the circle in physical movement and the creative potential for the generation of dance-making. It focuses on the relationship between space and the center of the body movement to show the design and execution of circular movements, creating a resonance of circles within different cultural contexts. The chapter provides valuable insights to the choreographers in the dance field, which tells how a single “circle” in terms of a visual that exists in every culture can be integrated during the creative process to foster innovation and expression in dance art. The paper significantly contributes to widening the horizon of symbolic practices and trans-cultural expression within the dance context by discovering the symbolic meanings of “the circle” within various

cultures and its use in creating dances. It opens new ideas and ways in which dances may be made.

1. “Circle” as a Starting Point

With 500 words, one can have a 500-word life. Our thoughts are shaped by words, and we use our knowledge to explore the vast world. As dance creators, we must also become well-versed in knowledge areas beyond our expertise. In other words, by expanding what we know, we also expand our capacity to think critically, imagine new possibilities, and innovate. The more we know about any base of knowledge—art or writing, solving problems, or simple daily conversation—the more tools we can use to bring an even broader diversity and complexity into creating a product.

Etymology

The word “circle” is derived from the Latin “circulus,” which refers to the small ring because of its shape. In English, the meaning of the word “circle” continued to expand and generated numerous terms and expressions with the meaning associated with the term. For instance, an hour as a unit of time consists of 24 segments, reflecting the perception of time as a cycle. The hands of a clock rotate around a circular dial, forming a continuous cycle, thus establishing a connection between hours and circles. Lima (2017) notes, “Historically, the circle has been the dominant shape of devices for measuring time, geographical location, or the position of stars, such as the sundial, compass, astrolabe, and astronomical clock” (p.25). Interestingly, the Latin “hora” also means time or one hour. In modern languages, mainly Romanian and other Balkan languages, “hora” is a traditional circle dance. The connection between the circle and dance can also be traced in the word “choreography,” which refers to the composing or arrangement of dance. This term was coined in 1789 from the French word “chorégraphie.” It is derived from the Latinized form of the Greek

“khoreia,” meaning “dance,” which is closely related to “chorus,” a group of dancers or singers who often perform in circular formations.

Translating “circle” into Chinese characters, it becomes “圆” (yuán). In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xu Shen compiled the *“Shuowen Jiezi,”* which analyzed Chinese characters’ phonetic and pictographic structures. In this classic work, Xu Shen explains the structure and meaning of the character “圆” (circle) with the entry: “圆，圜全也，从口，员声” (Xu & Tang, 2018, Vol.12). This description indicates that the character represents something complete and whole. The outer radical “口” symbolizes the concept of surrounding or encircling, while the inner component “员” provides the phonetic clue. According to Shirakawa (2010), the “员” character originally referred to a round bronze cooking vessel used in sacrificial ceremonies. The component “贝” is a simplified form of “鼎” (a type of ancient Chinese cauldron), with a small “口” added on top to represent the circular shape of an “O” (p.19).¹ These explanations illustrate the construction and origin of the character. Modern Chinese “circle” encompasses completeness, thoroughness, and smoothness. These evolved meanings reflect the character’s symbolic significance in conveying notions of wholeness and perfection that also implicitly reflect people’s deepening interpretations and applications of the circle concept.

Furthermore, this circle concept goes beyond simple words and language, as it is part of human thinking and understanding of the world. Various cultures have special symbolic meanings for it. From analysis, one can grasp the circle for integration into trans-cultural artistic practices from multiple standpoints. For instance, the expression of concern varies between cultures; in Austria, it is by greeting friends with words like “How are you?” while in China, it’s by asking, “Have you eaten?”. Such variations arise with the regional culture, social way of life, and lifestyle. Suitability of word usage is necessary as per the time and situation, and so is the case of dance choreography. Culturally sensitive practices are imperative for choreographers with respect for the origin and nuances of the incorporated

¹ Translation by the author of the thesis. Original text: “圆”乃圆鼎(原为炊煮用青铜器，用作祭器。“贝”乃“鼎”象文之简体，上加“口”表示圆形的“O”。

elements. The circle maintains universal appeal and dynamic potential as a special tool to resonate beyond cultural borders. At the same time, it is building an equal need to understand and appreciate different artistic traditions. As a creator, it should be researched more with critical reflection to negotiate the complexity of cultural representation using circles in dance, which should enhance the cultural narratives rather than diminish them.

A deeper interpretation of the text enhances our understanding of its cultural heritage and offers a valuable means to guide the exploration of bodily movement. Beginning with the forms of circles and circular characters, using physical movements to mimic these shapes can be an effective initial approach to exploring bodily practices in the early stages of creation. In *Improvisation Technologies: A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye*, Forsythe introduces the concept of “O-ing,” akin to drawing a “circle” in space through movements in the dance. By this, the dancers are tasked to regard their movement as drawing virtual, continuous circled, or elliptical paths. This trace is not localized to a single body part—any limb’s movement can be regarded as drawing a circle in space. This approach enables dancers to understand space better and increases the fluidity and continuity of the movement. Also, in *Cursive* by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, the practice of writing is woven with dance. Lin Hwai-min, the choreographer, uses the brush strokes characteristic of Chinese cursive to present the movements. It shows the beauty of the characters’ flowing curves and the body in motion. Even though some of the audience may not understand cursive script with Chinese characters, the beauty of the lines and the flow of energy can still be perceived. In this process, the human body acts as a communication medium for art, narrating different stories and feelings through dance. On this side, the artist will be able to merge the different cultural aspects in their work by studying the languages and knowledge of the cultures they relate with and develop an artistic work that carries a universality in pushing a lasting impact on society.

1.1 The Circle as a Universal Entity

Euclid (2008) defined a circle in his *Elements* as “a plane figure contained by a single line, such that all straight lines radiating towards from one point among those lying inside the figure are equal to one another” (p.6). The definition gives the circle as an abstract concept from wheels, the sun, and coins carrying general properties, independently from the material, size, and other characteristics, like the “form” discussed many times in ancient Greek philosophy. All things in the world exist loosely, but when some entities belong to each other through a principle of aggregation or structural logic, we recognize what it is—this is form. Everything in life has a form. In philosophy, form concerns existence and essence. In literature, form serves as the framework for organizing and expressing ideas. In art, form is the means of conveying aesthetics and emotions. The circle element can house a wide variety of forms, allowing us multidimensional associative from this basic form. “Used to represent a wide range of ideas and phenomena pertaining to almost every domain of knowledge, the circle became a universal metaphor embraced by virtually every civilization that has ever existed” (Lima, 2017, p.12). It can be the full moon in the sky or a deep well in the ground. When you draw a circle on paper, what meaning do you assign to it? Or how do you hope it will be understood?

“The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature, this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world” (Emerson, 1841). As described, circles are ubiquitous in our lives, which was my most intuitive feeling when I first noticed them. Almost like magic, they appear in the ripples created by raindrops falling into a lake, in the leaves swept up by the wind, in the stone-brick labyrinths in front of church doors, and in the way people gather in circles. The circle is an element widely used throughout the world. Across different social groups and historical periods, circles have borne rich symbolic meanings, with four main themes particularly prominent among these symbols: (1) simplicity and perfection; (2) unity and wholeness; (3) movement and cyclicity; (4) infinity and perpetuity (Lima, 2017, p.32).

From the point of view of philosophy, it is possible to consider the ancient Greek philosopher Plato as the best representative of “perfection.” According to his philosophy, the circle belongs to an ideally geometrical shape, a symbol of perfectness and symmetry. In contrast, the German philosopher Hegel considered the meaning of a circle from the viewpoint of motility and cyclicity as a symbol of cycle and return. In *The Science of Logic*, he wrote, “The whole of science is in itself a circle in which the first becomes also the last, and the last also the first” (Hegel & Di Giovanni, 2010, p.49). From this angle, the development of logic is dialectical. It is a circle, and, as such, it portrays the movement of concepts from themselves through opposition and contradiction back to themselves in a higher unity.

In Chinese tradition, the circle concept is more of a philosophical thought. Ancient Chinese thinking is uttered through various traditional philosophical schools, including Confucianism, whose expression includes the doctrine of the mean; Buddhism, whose expression consists of the karmic cycle; and Taoism, whose expressions include Yin-Yang and eight trigrams, all of which bear insight into the circle. The circle in Taoism stands for natural cycles and cosmic harmony. Similarly, from the perspective of “movement and cyclicity,” Laozi considers the Tao the central principle, incorporating reflections on its eternal nature. *Tao Te Ching* explained, “The Tao gives birth to One. One gives birth to Two. Two give birth to Three. Three gives birth to all things” (Laozi, 2014, Chapter 42). This passage describes the process of the Tao’s creation, illustrating the Taoist understanding of the origin of the universe and all things. This process begins with the formless “Tao,” proceeds through the emergence of “One,” then the formation of duality, and finally, through mutual interaction, generates all existence in the universe. Taoism views the operation of the Tao as a circle, without knowing when it begins or where it ends, like a well that is used but never exhausted, akin to the void filled with infinite possibilities (Laozi, 2014, Chapter 4). In traditional Confucian thought, the circle is seen as a symbol of harmony and balance, starting from unity and wholeness. This is related to Confucian emphasis on social order and moral norms. People’s understanding of the circle from different perspectives is closely associated with constructing social rules and establishing logical systems of their

time. As a cultural carrier, the circle is a way of handling affairs and a dialectical philosophical attitude.

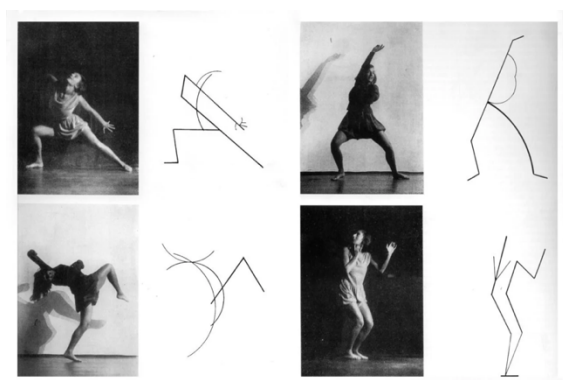


Figure 1. Kandinsky, V. (1926). *Dance Curves: The Dances of Palucca*



Figure 2. Kandinsky, V. (1926). *Several Circles*

Wassily Kandinsky is regarded as a pioneer of abstract art. He used spontaneous creative methods and techniques to express intense and unrestrained personal emotions. By giving up imitating visual reality, Kandinsky created abstract colors, dots, lines, and planes to express feelings and inner needs. In *Dance Curves: The Dances of Palucca*, he studied the dynamic behavior of the figure in dance and proceeded to outline the tension and spatial effects of the body on a two-dimensional medium using the simplest of drawing lines so that the treatment would be minimalist. Moreover, it can be a reference for making dances, allowing creators to express complex feelings and ideas abstractly through movements, lines, and shapes free of any narrative or realistic limitation. In *Several Circles*, Kandinsky constructed a dynamic, almost cosmic scene from different sizes and colors of circles. One could feel the mystery of physical space and the immediate sense of rhythm from applying those circles, processed through the creator's thoughts and techniques. This proves that artists can consciously transform material objects into immaterial ones by using the circle symbol to expose their awareness of the abstract nature beyond physical objects and their interrelations.

In dance creation, the circle as an element is used not only to shape circle movements but can also be used as an inner motive inherent in the dynamic logic of a choreographic

thought. Circular formations and movements could be expressed in choreography with some symbolic meaning like unity, harmony, or cyclicity. For example, in *The Rite of Spring*, Pina Bausch revealed the cyclicity of primal rituals and the potent force of nature through circular formations and dynamic movements. By employing circles in dancing, creators express their understanding of this form and present the application of the creative expression of space and dynamics in the art of dancing.

The circle is a universal presence, evidencing wide-ranging influences and growth across many fields of knowledge. That stems from the uniqueness of the shape; it is not just any other geometric figure found within textbooks but a sign and symbol expressing multiple creative meanings through the feelings of perfection, mystery, and security it produces in people. Its intrinsic qualities enabled it to transcend mere geometry and gave it many interpretations in various cultural and intellectual contexts. As creators, we must communicate clear ideas and carefully transfer our thoughts into our work. Even a simple circular spotlight on the stage can become a beacon of light in the distance or be understood as a lingering warmth in the darkness. We can attribute richer connotations and deeper meanings to the work through definite communication of creative ideas.

1.2 Circular Awareness Activities

The shape of the circle unconsciously permeates various aspects of human activities. Although not intentional, this “circular awareness” objectively reflects human cognition of the world and natural order.

Natural phenomena

Starting from curiosity about the sun and moon, the similarity between the circle and the movements of the sun and moon, such as the daily rising and setting of the sun’s trajectory and the moon’s phases, has influenced people’s concept of time and life rhythm. The sun’s circular shape and the moon’s phases are naturally regarded as symbols of time

cycles. Additionally, many natural phenomena, such as the bending of rivers, the rounding of stones, and the rings of trees, subtly shape people's understanding of circles. Notably, tree rings distinctly exhibit the cycles of life and the marks of time. As a result, these circular imprints are deeply embedded in human understanding of nature.

Pottery



Figure 3. Dancing Figure Painted Pottery Basin

1973, the Neolithic painted pottery basin with dancing figures was found in Qinghai, which dates back about 5000 years. The unknown artist succeeded in marrying the circle derived from the form of a basin with a circle dance, making a good demonstration of the circle in very early human consciousness. On the interior wall of the basin, five small figures are shown holding hands, dancing around and around in a circle. There are three such groups, each separated by four parallel decorative lines. The figures seem to be performing a circle dance; they are in identical poses, and their rhythm is one. Early artistic creations were often based on imitation of the real world, and this can be felt in the intuitive and emotional flow from realistic depiction to abstract representation in these drawings. As Mao (2020) points out, "The arm-in-arm dancing around a central point illustrates the convergence of hearts and emotional resonance among people of that time" (p.68).² Furthermore, these circular patterns appeared quite often in the decoration and artifacts of those ages. Like, circles can be found in pottery designs and woven pieces. Other than the

² Translation by the author of the thesis. Original text: 面向“圆心”，挽臂而舞，体现出人心汇聚，情感共鸣。

aesthetic purpose, these objects also serve as unconscious expressions of people's desire and imagination of circles. For example, the worship of the sun by ancient people is seen in the circular symbols and images, which appear quite often in religious and mythological stories on murals. The sun god was usually shown as a circular disc to symbolize divinity and power. Although these works of creation may perhaps not have consciously emphasized the symbolic meaning of circles, they no doubt reflect the important role that circular forms occupy in cultural expression.

Circle dance

The signs of circle dances on the painted pottery basin are not limited only to their designs but also exist in many cultures globally and remain present in our contemporary ages. Take, for example, the Hora: This is a folk dance reasonably familiar across the Balkans and Israel. It plays a vital cultural and historical role among the communities where it has its home. This dance usually occurs at weddings, festivals, and other significant occasions in the community. Participants dance in a circle, holding hands or linking arms, to lively music and songs that reflect unity and community harmony. It is usually performed in circular form with simple, rhythmical steps pleasing to participants of any age and background. One can find such self-entertainment and social circle dance in China as well. In the Tibetan area, a dance called "Guoxie" is closely related to their agricultural activities. The Tibetan word "Guoxie" translates to "circle dance." The dance movements are also simple and easy to master and are performed in a circular motion. It is widespread throughout the vast areas of Tibetan regions. "With the graceful movements of a dance and full-colored lyrics, Guoxie extols labors, harvests, and love, fully presenting the industriousness, wisdom, and bravery imbued in the bone and blood of the Tibetan people" (Tenzin Tshering, 2000, p.68).³ Guoxie reenacts agricultural labor through dancing. It reinforces community and ethnic cohesions by making circles to promote interpersonal communication and cultural transmission. People of Tibet celebrate harvests according to different religious ceremonies

³ Translation by the author of the thesis. Original text: 它以优美的舞蹈动律, 丰富多彩的歌词内容, 歌颂了劳动、丰收和爱情, 展示了藏族人民勤劳、智慧、勇敢的民族性格。

and festivals and pray for protection from the gods during the Tibetan New Year and Shoton Festival. The technique of communicating with the deities with the help of circle dancing is practiced by many cultures. During rituals and celebrations like the Sun Dance of Native Americans and circle dancing of African tribes, people are usually in a ring while dancing or praying. These gestures honor nature and the god and speak indirectly through the circle form in respect and wonder to life's cycle and natural order.

Defense

Defense is another strong advantage of circular structures since the forces acting from the outside, acting evenly, are even distributed along the circle. The practical use of round dwellings can be seen in houses such as round thatched huts in Africa, yurts in Central Asia, and Celtic roundhouses in Europe, representing one of the most prevalent residential forms in many cultures. This circular concept has more to it and can also relate to the architectural layout of tribes, villages, and cities, showing how it has extended and is used for different functions. "Since the early days of human sedentism, most settlements, villages, and cities have followed some type of circular arrangement, normally enclosing a primary area bustling with important economic, social, and political activities" (Lima, 2017, p.17). A good example is the Circulade, mainly found in Languedoc, southern France. The medieval village layout was designed in a circle for added security and assimilation into solid social units.

Cosmic circle

There is a saying in China: "Round sky and square earth." The ancients believed that the heavens were round, symbolizing infinity, cycles, and change—this reflected the dynamic nature of things in the universe. The earth was square, symbolizing stability, order, and rules, reflecting the pursuit of stability and balance within human society. In Heaven and Earth, unity epitomized the balance and harmony of the cosmos. Cirlot (1995) elaborates that when seeking an abstract representation of cosmic order that conveys the close and intense relationship between heaven and earth, one naturally combines the

symbols of the square (earth) and the circle (heaven) (p.128). Such an idea was reflected not only in antique Chinese thought but also in architecture. In the past, the layout of ancient Chinese palaces and temples was often based on a square design, as squares symbolized dignity and power, while circles have often been used to represent nature in gardens and the Temple of Heaven.

This thinking has transcended time and has been incorporated into modern architectural design, an example of which is the Shanghai Grand Theatre. It combines modern architectural aesthetics with the core principles of Chinese culture. Opened in 1998, the iconic building was designed by the French architectural firm Arte Charpentier. The floor plan of the theatre is based on a square, which symbolizes the stability and order of the earth. At the same time, the curving rooflines represent the circle of the heavens, symbolizing completeness and infinity. This mix of square and circle is a very modern take on ancient Chinese thought. In fact, “Round Sky” equally conjures up the image of many religious venues. The circular layout in ancient Stonehenge and many of the round altars in ancient temples were probably imitations of this same sky and the shapes of celestial bodies. These were possibly designed to create a link and resonance between the divine and the universe using the circle form.



Figure 4. Shanghai Grand Theatre

Sociological aspects of the circle: coming together, theatres, own experiment

Without realizing it, people will always form a circle when they are collecting or meeting. Forming a circle is quite natural for bringing comfort both physiologically and psychologically. It ensures the conversation is eye-to-eye, which is crucial for a social being. This formation will make it easy for everybody to participate equally in the conversation, minimize power differences, and maximize possibilities for social exchange. Everyone sees each other in a circle, which lessens potential threats and uncertainties and indirectly increases group cohesion and trust. “This universal behavior underlies the shape of many ancestral entertainment structures” (Lima, 2017, p.18). The Colosseum and amphitheatres are great examples of circular entertainment structures. The buildings were designed to hold thousands of audiences and had a 360-degree field of view; therefore, every individual in the place could see the event or performance clearly.

In one of my creative performances, I invited the audience to sit in a circle.⁴ It was not an imaginative repetition of the daily move in “a circle gathered,” but an exploration that could be linked to the phrase “Round Sky and Square Earth.” This performance moved closely with the conflict and interaction of the circular and square shapes, carrying thoughts about the traditional theatre’s “fourth wall” regarding the circular way of viewing. Traditional theatres are square or rectangular spaces with a “fourth wall” separating the audience from the performers. The audience only passively observes, in this case, while the performers are actively present, that the position and perspective of the audience are fixed and singular: they must perceive and understand the performance from one angle, which is pre-determined. This square structure embodies order, stability, and control, representing a mode of viewing conditioned by entrenched theatrical norms. However, asking the audience to sit in a circle challenges this traditional viewing mode. The circular seating makes those watching feel more active than passive. On one side, they are watching the play; on the other, they are watched by other people. The gap between the “fourth wall” is broken. This

⁴ *To the winds* (2024) - LEICHT ÜBER LINZ Festival für aktuelle Musik

creates a blurring effect between the performer and the audience, with every individual from the audience having a unique way of viewing and experiencing the events, just like the multi-dimensional relationships elaborated in “Round Sky and Square Earth.”

Both perspective and distance become key in this circular viewing mode. The seated people are brought to a different angle for viewing performances; each gets a different experience. This multi-dimensional perspective creates an engagement for the audience other than just passively perceiving the performance. This means that the complexities and subtleties of the performance are more richly revealed. Meanwhile, because the energy flow inside a round structure is only sharpened by this new mode of audience participation, the entire performance becomes more immersive and cohesive. This mode, meanwhile, introduces new challenges. While the circular viewing structure may greatly assist in interaction and immersion, it can also mean that some viewers become uncomfortable or overly self-aware when they become conscious of others watching them. Also, every audience member should have a good view and experience of the action from their unique position, which must be thought through carefully considering stage design and lighting from all angles. Taken together, then, the square/circle relationship not only very clearly constitutes an opposition between different ways of looking but also allows us to ponder on how one might be able to break that “fourth wall” at the same time as one exploits all these possibilities of singular interactivity and immersion realized with a circular structure. This emancipated understanding produces new possibilities for dealing with the arts and artistic expression beyond the traditional restrictions of a theater.

1.3 Circular symbols and embodies interpretations

As early as history recalls, various circular symbols have evolved from the circle as a primary form. The most common are the Yin-Yang, Ouroboros, Mandala, and Tree of Life. Based on their respective cultures, each symbol presents its worldview about the circle and, in turn, influences art, religion, philosophy, and daily life. This section analyzes the Yin-Yang

and Ouroboros as case studies to explore their connections to the circle and also their similarities and differences.

- **Yin-Yang**

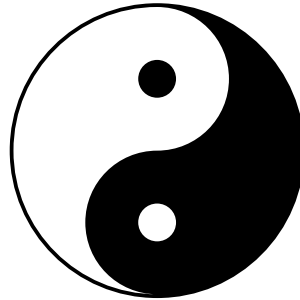


Figure 5. Yin-Yang

Yin-Yang is an ancient Chinese idea. Just as there was no identifiable inventor, it emerged with the gradual advance of Chinese culture, philosophy, and science. This concept is systematically explained and applied in countless classical texts. The Yin-Yang symbol is composed of a circle that is divided into two opposing parts, one of which is black, representing Yin, and the other part is white, representing Yang. Each half contains a little spot of the opposite color. The S-shaped curve within the sign represents Yin-Yang's active contact and dynamic movement, so it implicitly conveys the concept of rotation (Cirlot, 1995, p.48).

Simply put, Yin-Yang can be considered as two opposite faces of an object. For example, the side of a mountain illuminated by the sun represents Yang, and the shaded side represents Yin. Yin and Yang represent two fundamentals of opposing forces. While Yang is always related to brightness, activity, and firmness, Yin represents softness, stillness, and secrecy. Their transformation explains the continuous change process from the first instance to the end. As *Tao Te Ching* puts it, "The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang; through the blending of the energy of these two, they achieve harmony" (Laozi, 2014, Chapter 42). This line represents that the world is made up of Yin-Yang; thus, the Daoist approach is the force of polarity. According to Daoism, all universe changes derive from the

interaction of these two forces. “The vertical axis through the centre of the Yang-Yin constitutes the ‘unvarying mean’ or, in other words, the mystic ‘Centre’ where there is no rotation, no restlessness, no impulse, nor any suffering of any kind” (Cirlot, 1995, p.380). The centre is a place of infinite peace and harmony, representing the ideal balance and wisdom of the universe. When connected with the Dao in Daoist philosophy, which represents the source and ultimate reality of all existence, it implies the highest state individuals seek to attain through spiritual cultivation.

I consider Yin-Yang the second door I open during creative practice in the circle. This circular symbol has deep roots in my culture, influencing my thinking and perception. To me, Yin-Yang is one of the ways through which I interpret the world; it opens aspects of seeing things and issues from two opposing perspectives. For instance, we understand sweetness from bitterness and happiness from sadness. Taking examples of large and small, visible and invisible, I first categorized the circular motions different body parts can perform by size. Then, I restricted the dancers to execute only the smallest circular motions. Due to this limitation, the visibility of the movements is restricted. However, when I asked the performers to speed up to the limit, it brought a strange contrast: the speed made the small-scale movements apparent. I also incorporated movements from Chinese classical dance into this small experiment. Under the influence of this specific dance style, I instinctively thought about how I would feel doing the same movements at their normal size while performing small movements. Externally, my actions seemed small, but the internal energy flow was evident.

Human life is one great contradiction, much like Yin and Yang. Nowadays, in Chinese working society, people wear a special mask to hide their individualities but often release their dissatisfaction online, as if two different selves exist in the world. On the Chinese Internet, they say, “Ideals are plump, but reality is skinny.” From a social perspective, people have divisions, and we all live amidst a sea of disparities. These gaps are not only generational but class and destiny as well. A little girl in a mountain village might dream of

candy, while a city boy might want a real airplane. The reality of these differences can shift people's dreams. The destiny constructed by human actions is evidence of life's changes and allows us to know our lives. I also try to conduct the movements using people's knowledge of the imaginary spaces and the world in my work. For example, I invited two dancers to create a self-imaginary space with many circles of different sizes, each having various densities—the dancers next improvised in this space under these constraints. Though the two dancers followed the same path but were affected by different spatial restrictions, the dynamic differences emerged. Likewise, we all exist in this world, but our freedoms and restrictions differ. In this process, the dancers' understanding of the world and spatial imagination materializes their body shapes and transforms this imaginary space into reality. Conversely, the dancers' cognition is also influenced by what the world offers.

In my creative journey, Yin-Yang is more than just a philosophical notion; they are a force that significantly impacts my artistic expression and thought process. By adopting this principle through dance, I have discovered contrasts and balances on different scales, speeds, and spaces. This relationship of opposition and complementarity comes to life in the dancer's body expression, making the concept tangible. Furthermore, in this process, I have found that everyone staggers ahead through their contradictions and oppositions—bound by the facts of life, yet yearning for that freedom, too. Yin-Yang's wisdom teaches us to look at the world from another angle: find balance within opposition and harmony within contradictions. This is a method of creation and a philosophy of life. Applying this philosophy in my work, where every detail of the piece reflects the yin-yang principle, responds to the world's complexity, and expresses the human pursuit of inner peace and harmony.

● **Ouroboros**

"This symbol appears principally among the Gnostics and is depicted as a dragon, snake or serpent biting its own tail" (Cirlot, 1995, p.246). It first originated in ancient Egypt around 1600 BCE. Such a circular symbol is found in many ancient cultures, symbolizing eternity,

infinity, and cyclicity. Plato described an original cosmic organism involved in self-devouring; it was immortal and had a perfect biological structure. This was a description of the outermost layer of the atmosphere of a cosmic organism, instead of a mythological serpent, and without there being a direct reference to “Ouroboros,” but the concept of cyclical infinity follows the primary logic that the Ouroboros covers. As Franz (1980) stated, “When the head and the tail, the opposites, meet, there a flow is born, which is what the alchemists mean by the mystical or divine water, which I described as the meaningful flux of life” (p.174). This suggests the idea of unity in oppositions and dynamic balance through a harmonious flow brought about when the opposites meet and the significance of that flow in life. The concept of opposites is present in many philosophical and religious systems, such as Yin-Yang. Franz’s word “flow” refers to physical movement and life’s vivifying quality and significance. Life manifests and unfolds through the dynamic balance of opposites in a state of constant change and flow. When opposites meet, the stream symbolizes the material world’s cyclical renewal and reflects life’s more profound dynamic balance and meaning.



Figure 6. Ouroboros

In some versions, the Ouroboros have a striking similarity to Yin-Yang. “There is a Venetian manuscript on alchemy which depicts the Ouroboros with its body half-black (symbolizing earth and night) and half-white (denoting heaven and light)” (Cirlot, 1995, p.247). The thoughts they encapsulate are common, although coming from different cultures and traditions. So, while Yin-Yang deals with the dynamic consideration of certain things in the time dimension of the present, Ouroboros deals with the entire period from

origin to end and includes life and death. The similarities and differences of these circular symbols might stem from their inherent features of being a circle and from the will of humankind, related to exploration and endless reflections over the world. Circular symbols of this kind in different civilizations endowed the circle with various meanings and functions, which inspire and support circle meanings in artistic creation.

1.4 Within the Circles

As human society continues to develop, the use of the circle has become increasingly abstract and conceptual. The notion of the circle as a container is employed in countless idioms associated with completeness, continuity, and cycles. For instance, in English, “coming full circle” refers to returning to the original point or situation by which something in a cycle is complete. Equally, a “vicious circle” is a situation where one problem gives rise to another, creating a relentless loop of difficulties. In China, the idiom “画地为牢” (draw a circle on the ground as a prison) means someone restricts themselves with the circle they create, symbolizing self-imposed limitations.

As Emerson wrote in *Circles* (1841), “The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.” Emerson relates personal development to circles, revealing human life’s infinite dynamism and potential. The circle symbolizes how individuals grow from small beginnings, with each new circle symbolizing growth, exploration, and challenges. This concept offers deep philosophical insight into life’s complexity. These examples focus on the individual perspective of the circle. In modern communication technology, circles represent signal coverage areas, indirectly symbolizing influence and coverage. When used to define social boundaries, the circle signifies inclusion and exclusion, segregation, and labeling. Terms like “art circle,” “entertainment circle,” and “social circle” describe the internal structures and external boundaries of social layers, with the circle’s closed and continuous nature becoming a metaphor for cultural norms and social relationships. The various

group-symbolic circles begin to be drawn around and upon an individual from the moment they are born. We are seen to be our unique selves as we progress from childhood, but we are attached to labels of more than one group circle. These group characteristics play among us and manifest as invisible circles occurring in our growth process, reflecting the people and surroundings we have been in. One's life is an expanding circle: from a family circle to social circles, then to friend circles, and the circle continues. It represents our relations in life and comprises the regions, the civilizations, the histories, and the political situations experienced. Then, the circles eventually become bodies and identities; they are unique aggregations. Through varied individual circles, we may witness the expressions of diversity, but it also shows the shortcomings of individual expression within given modes of development. The widening of each circle is not simply a process of growth in an individual sense but is also the adventure of ever-new discovery and comprehension of reality.

As the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1992) stated, "No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe" (p.25). This statement profoundly reveals the central role of symbols in constructing human cognition and culture. Symbols help humans organize and interpret perceived information, building an understanding of the world. As the medium of communication, symbols allow humans to express knowledge and experience, and even sentiment, and to communicate with others; social interaction and cooperation can thus be achieved. Culture and knowledge can be transmitted and developed via symbolic systems. In my opinion, art, science, and philosophy are inseparable from the backing of symbols. Their abstract and flexible nature propels humanity continuously on the journey of innovation and creation. The symbols allowed human beings to take them out of the bonds of time and space, with the help of which they could reach what was unknown. The circle is one of the most fundamental, powerful, and inclusive in its meaning symbols in many symbolic meanings and within various spheres. The presence of circular symbols makes it an attempt to dig deeper into the inner world of a human being for the laws of nature and the secrets of the universe. In their pure and abstract form, Circles capture and portray the subtle emotions and creative significances that men

experience beyond time and space. Contemporary artists no longer restrict their works to formulaic rules and styles; instead, they focus more on the diversification of expressions of real-world society. This diversification in expression brings about a natural change in the art symbols and images to reflect the current social environment and cultural structures to expand and promote public aesthetic tastes. In creation, the circle can serve as a symbolic representation of the complex emotions within an individual's inner world or as a tool for social critique and reflection, revealing societal issues and cultural phenomena.

2. The Integration of the “Circle” and Dance

The integration of the circle with dance can be focused on various dimensions, such as choreographically, circles are obvious in the movements of the body, and whether in solo or group dances, rotation, bending, and extension of dancers' limbs can produce diversified, circular forms or dynamics in trajectories. Moreover, circularity is often expressed using stage space and the arrangement of dance formations. In the great majority of choreographic pieces, the circle plays an important role not only in movement and dynamics but also as a core member of stage design. The circle reinforces the visual cohesion and multiplies the symbolic impact of the dance. Moreover, the circle as a geometrical figure in many cultures denotes eternity, cyclicity, or completeness. It is through dance that the circle conveys the emotional expression and spiritual aspirations of its creators. In the trans-cultural artistic exchange and integration, though different dance forms in various cultural backgrounds have their own way of expression, the circle often serves as a point of resonance where its diversified expressions help to form a link for artistic communication and integration in dance.

In the fusion of the circle and dance, the circular form is a visual and sensory experience as a dance form and medium of expression in culture. Variations of the circle in

dance abound, whereby different forms of the same bring out multiple layers of emotion and spirituality. As Foster (1986) points out, "A semiological analysis does not directly address the issue of the relationship between the sign and its context... the sign should be seen as a coupling of signifier and signified that occurs always in a specific cultural and historical moment" (p.233). Therefore, the circular symbol in dance should be taken as an expression attached to its cultural background. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the circle's existence within dance. For example, two cases were selected: Sufi Whirling and Chinese classical dance. They show how the circle is employed with special meanings in the dance, which is deeply interwoven into the cultural context within two considerably diverse cultural backgrounds.

2.1 The Circle in Sufi Whirling

Sufi Whirling, an integral part of Sufism's religious rituals, transcends being merely a dance form; it is a profound expression of mystical thought. Torsos spinning in boundless motion trace symbolic circular trajectories that, when viewed from the center, manifest things of beauty: spirals. Spirals stand for philosophic and spiritual aspiration in Sufism. The circular movements in Sufi Whirling become a medium that distinctly expresses the personal spiritual search and religious experience of the soul, embodying the deep yearning of the devotee for God and the process leading to spiritual transcendence by means of dance.

Historical Background and Religious Significance

It can be traced back to the 13th century when it was first developed as a ritual that would provide a means for religious meditation or Dhikr and purification of the soul through bodily movement. The famous Sufi poet and mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi started the practice. Rumi regarded whirling as a means and way to show infinite love and respect to God, and he treated the "circle" as something sacred- a smooth connection between man and God or the individual and the universe. The philosophy of Sufism dance revolves around unity with God through an inner spiritual search within oneself, and such a search manifests

itself in the Whirling dance. As Friedlander and Uzel (2003) note, “The sema (whirling dance) of the dervishes is an expression of the cosmic joy experienced by the simultaneous effect of annihilation and glorification” (p.83). In this ritual, the circle transcended its physical geometric form to become symbolized by the spiral dynamics generated through the whirling of the dancers. Spirals here stand for cycles in the universe, infinity in time, and eternity of soul. With every turn the dancer carries out and performs, it recapitulates “cosmic truth,” both a perception and expression of divine order. Thus, Sufi Whirling says that the soul’s journey returns to its divine source through unity with God through spinning. That is a meaning that is symbolic of the whirling of Sufis and plays a vital role in the religious practice of Sufism.



Figure 7. Whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi Order

Symbolic Meaning in Movements

Sufi Whirling has the image of the circle not only in the spinning movements of the dancers but also in the rhythm and speed of rotation and trajectory, expressing deep religious symbolism in general. At its commencement, the dancers discard their worldly garments, marking the renunciation of the material world and entrance into the sacred spiritual world. While spinning, the white, flying skirts slowly unfold and signify the liberation and expansion of the soul. During the turn, one foot will be used as the pivot while the body is lightly pushed with the other foot, and the posture is kept upright. As they spin, the arms open, one palm turned upward to the sky to receive divine inspiration, while

the other is turned down toward earth to transmit great divine energy into the world. It follows that this is not only an acknowledgment of cosmic energy but also a signaling of a relationship between humanity and the divine.

As Bocken (2023) noted, “The dance is not an expression of a theological abstraction. For the dancing Sufi, they are commentaries on an original experience in concrete life” (p.11). Each rotation by the dancer is a complete circular movement, both a visual form and a symbol of spiritual experience. “As one turns, orientation is lost; one loses one’s grip on things. Intellect and action become one, and existence is without boundaries” (Friedlander & Uzel, 2003, p.89). This spinning, therefore, keeps inducing a meditative state in the dancer, wherein the recurring movement is supposed to share its vibrations with the universe. The spinning in a circular motion is symbolic of the eternal cycle of the soul within the universe, and the dissolution of time and unity with divinity is felt while performing the round motions. The rhythm and pace of the rotation are, at the same time, very important to the “circle” performance. The speed of the turning continuously grows in accordance with the ritual stages. First, such acceleration of the circular movement develops its dynamic visible charm; secondly, it becomes a symbol of how the soul, being gradually freed from worldly shackles in pursuit of the Lord, becomes purified and finally is raised to the stage of pure spirituality.

Psychological and Emotional Effects

In Sufi Whirling, the circular movement is important for what it creates psychologically and emotionally within the dance. For the dancer, the circle created by the rotation is much more than a physical experience; it is, rather, the path to spiritual elevation. As Friedlander and Uzel (2003) described, “The whirling dance can be interpreted as the dance of everything created around the central Sun of Divine Love; it also means to re-enact death and resurrection” (p.18). The spinning dancer generates an out-of-body experience referred to as “Fana,” signifying self-destruction in the transcendence of personal consciousness to attain a confrontation with the divine.

For the audience, the view of Sufi Whirling is very moving. It is believed that due to the circular spinning, viewers can even feel the rhythm and the cyclical power of the dance. This sensory experience often evokes an inner response, bringing in feelings of purification and elevation in spiritual experience. In watching this twirling dance, the viewers are enraptured by the ebullient body movements of the dancer and then experience a spiritual energy that moves beyond. The idea relates to the Sufi understanding of cosmic order and divine spirit in that the universe is made up of a self-similar rotating circle, and an individual is part of this cosmic cycle. The same goes for spinning, which reunites a person with the cosmos in the way Sufi Whirling brings the concept of the “circle” as a spiritual experience in physical life.

The circular shape of Sufi Whirling extends from an active, harmonious form to a tangible expression of Sufi mysticism. The repetitive spinning in a circle is the most symbolic representation of investigation into one of the biggest and most advanced concepts in life. It is the whirling motion by which dancers and the audience experience a sacred spiritual experience of energy and presence outside this physical world. That circle in Sufi Whirling is not just a visual center of gravity of the dance but an important element in the religion-spiritual experience, signaling something different about the value of dance in voicing religion and furthering spiritual development. This form is highly important during religious rituals and affords a special lens through which to contextualize Sufi mysticism. The deeper investigation of the symbolism of the circle in Sufi Whirling allows us to understand the spiritual world of Sufism better and be taken into a religious experience beyond common realities.

2.2 The Circle in Chinese Classical Dance

The origins of Chinese classical dance can be traced back to ancient China’s ritual music and early religious ceremonies. “The first historical form of Chinese classical dance was the ancient shamanistic dances. Performed to entertain the gods, this primitive religious

dancing aimed at beseeching the sky's blessing to pour upon the earth.” (Su, 2015, p.20).⁵ Over time, this dance tradition evolved into various forms. For example, the ritual music dances that began during the Zhou Dynasty emphasized form and regulation. The court dances of the Tang Dynasty were technically complex and exhibited a high degree of artistry and theatricality. During the Song Dynasty, folk dance and acrobatics elements were integrated, gradually forming a unique style. In the modern era, Chinese classical dance experienced a revival and reconstruction. In the 1950s, based on the study and organization of traditional dances, China systematically summarized and innovated this dance form, leading to the establishment of the current system of Chinese classical dance.

“Chinese classical dance (Zhongguo gudianwu) originally referred to dances derived from Chinese indigenous theater (xiqu) forms, especially Peking opera (Jingju) and Kun opera (Kunqu). Today, Chinese classical dance also includes newer schools of technique developed from research on historical court performances and religious artifacts. Two of the most prominent of these are the Han-Tang and Dunhuang schools” (Wilcox, 2018, p.83).

As one of the primary forms of dance education in Chinese academic institutions, Chinese classical dance emphasizes the coordination of body techniques, gestures, steps, and eye movements while also stressing the integration of external movements with internal spiritual states in its performance style. The “circle” is particularly prominent in this dance form, manifesting in many dance postures and technical styles.

In body movement

In Chinese classical dance, body techniques (Shenfa) and rhythm (Yunlü) are treated as the soul of this type of art. Shenfa is about the external technical aspect, while Yunlü expresses an internal artistic essence. Those elements' organic combination and mutual

⁵ Translation by the author of the thesis. Original text: 上古巫乐是中国古典舞的第一历史形态。这种原始宗教类的娱神之舞，目的在于祈求上天降福人间。

penetration embody Chinese classical dance's aesthetic spirit and charm. The dance follows a fundamental traditional theatrical principle, that of "seeking the circle"; all the movements and transitions are imbued with circular rising and falling motions. In Shenyun or body rhythm training, the "Three Circles" represent this dance's most essential and representative type of movement pathways. The circular dynamics on their own would form basic movements and essentially influence the dancer's bodily expressiveness and the dance's general aesthetic. "Three Circles" refers to the horizontal circle, the vertical circle, and the figure-eight circle.

Horizontal Circle: It describes movements in circular form on a horizontal plane. Most arm swings, body rotations, and footwork require parallel to the ground surface. The horizontal circle, thus, deals with lateral extension, wherein the movement forms come out in "millstone" shape patterns.

Vertical Circle: Movements performed on a vertical plane are called circular. These circles are generally perpendicular to the floor and focus more on upward, downward, forward, and backward circular movements. The vertical circle develops the three-dimensional and spatial awareness of movement.

Figure-Eight Circle: This is the movement configured in, for example, two arms in opposite circles moving in opposition. Two interlocking overlapping circles are made in front of or on the sides of the body. The figure-eight circle has simultaneous coordination relative to two circles in opposite directions.

The core components of the Shenyun techniques in Chinese classical dance are the "Three Circles". They not only dictate the pathways and bodily control but also help in the expressiveness of the dance, the spatial awareness, and aesthetic impact it assumes. It is everywhere in the specific movement designs particular to the Chinese classical dance: the use of the circular forms. For an example of this, there is the traditional movement known as "Yun-shou" (Cloud hands), existing both in traditional martial arts and in Chinese

indigenous theater. It is not for the explosive power in martial arts, either, but for subtlety and agility with powerful restrained force. Here in theater, it would reject the aggressiveness of the martial aspect but underline the transition of power in dynamic motion.

The extending Yun-shou in Chinese classical dance originates from those forms but puts more emphasis on the concept of “cloud.” “It involves the ‘three-dimensional’ circular motion generated by the crossed movement of the arms; in theater, Yun-shou is likened to ‘kneading a ball,’ which is a precise and vivid metaphor” (Tang et al., 1991, p.33).⁶ It is the simulation of floating clouds in the sky through circular movements of the arms, with the torso functioning as the axis, guiding the body, with the breath, into twisting motions, while the arms create a circular motion to produce a kinetic effect of undulation visually to create the buoyant feeling of clouds. Figure 8: This is a developed form; the main Peking opera martial artist, Gai Jiaotian, created this form. Expansive movements and extreme tension in the trajectory of the motion in this form are used to manifest dynamic contrasting power within the technique.

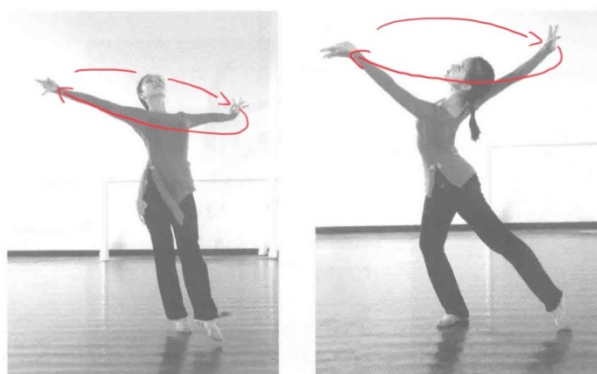


Figure 8. Yun-shou (Cloud hands)

Of course, such an integration of the circle into Chinese classical dance is far from being covered within these few examples. From the “Three Circles” and “Yun-shou,” we glimpse

⁶ Translation by the author of the thesis. Original text: 它是在双臂交叉运行而产生“立体式”的圆线运动，戏曲中形容云手要像“揉球”，这是很准确而形象的比喻。

the various applications and meanings that circular forms have in this kind of dance. According to Wilcox's "Dynamic Inheritance," it is unmistakable that within the context of Chinese classical dance, the circle is not just a simple movement design but also a very strong vehicle for deep-seated cultural connotations.⁷ It represents generations of legacy and innovation in the history of Chinese artistic culture by active dance practitioners, which enables this aesthetic reflection and the research of movement to show artistic charm that can last. The concept of the circle continues to inspire creators so much. It not only reminds us of the preciseness required in the pursuit of technique but also points to profound cultural reflections and emotional connotations in dancing that are to be synchronized with contemporary humanistic development.

Aesthetic Origins

Zhu (2006) notes, "The circle is an important spiritual archetype in Chinese culture, closely related to the Chinese cosmic consciousness and life sentiment. It also contains vital messages about the spirit of Chinese artistic life" (p. 358).⁸ Indeed, the circle symbolically means much more in traditional Chinese culture than just some concept of philosophy and cosmology- it deeply influences the forms of artistic expression. The aesthetic features of Chinese classical dance are firmly based on the circle. The circle expresses the harmonious and complete pursuits of the Chinese as well as a deep understanding of natural order regarding the cycle of life. The circle in dance takes shape as liquid movements of the body and soft curves in space, acting as a medium for the dancer to express the inner spirit and outer form.

The aesthetics of circles are deeply reflected in the harmonious philosophical conception of yin and yang and the interdependence of motion and stillness within Chinese classical dance. One could speak of how dancers dance through rounded posture

⁷ Dynamic Inheritance: This approach of dynamic inheritance views individual creativity as essential to the ongoing preservation of cultural heritage, rather than as something in opposition to it (Wilcox, 2018, p.81).

⁸ Translation by the author of the thesis. Original text: 圆是中国文化中的一个重要精神原型，它与中国人的宇宙意识、生命情调等具有密切的关系，它也包含中国艺术生命精神的重要消息。

development and movements to achieve balance, but not only in form, even in spirit-ultimately, to a unity between the inner and outer worlds. In this aesthetic pursuit, every single detail of the dance requires the dancer to show a subtle balance between movement and stillness, curve and straightness, and emptiness with the solidity of the body. An example would be supposing the dancer has to draw a circle to the left with both arms; at the very beginning of such movement, he should slightly shift the body weight and the arm dynamics to the right to gather the energies and then proceed with the leftward movement releasing all such energy. Such momentum-breeding, “retreating before advancing, curving before stretching,” is an intelligent interpretation of the philosophy of Yin-Yang in Chinese classical dance.

The different schools of Chinese classical dance have their unique ways of applying circular aesthetics: in Kunqu, the emphasis lies on the circularity and fluidity of the movement to create a feeling of endless extension; the arched waist in Han-Tang dance reveals the elegance and gracefulness of ancient aesthetics; and in Dunhuang dance, its complicated circular structures reflect a rich religious meaning and mysterious aroma. These circular movements create beautiful lines and reflect the depth of thought with which the dancer reflected upon nature, interpersonal relationships, and even philosophy on life. This development through circular aesthetics reflects the historical processes of variation and innovation that Chinese classical dance has gone through. From ancient cosmology thinking to today’s aesthetic awareness, the circle is a consistent aesthetic model ensuring continuity in the artistic life of Chinese classical dance. Today, the round esthetic still carries its inertia of traditional symbolic meaning into dancing creation and performance, interacting with contemporary dancing forms. This kind of eternal aesthetic heritage makes the circle not only a basic element in the form of dance but also part of the Chinese cultural spirit.

2.3 Comparative Analysis and Reflections

The use of the circle in dance brings out both diversity and universality in transcultural studies. From Sufi Whirling to Chinese classical dance, each of these traditions bears its deep cultural meanings and spiritual aspirations with the circle in its way. Comparing the role of the circle in the two forms of dance will allow us a deeper look into its symbolic meaning across cultures and give us pause to ponder its value and potential in contemporary cross-cultural exchange.

Sufi Whirling introduces the traditions of Islamic culture, while Chinese classical dance emanates from Chinese culture. While both performances are circular, the meanings attached to both are reflective of wonderful cultural differences based on their origin. Sufi Whirling: The circle in Sufi whirling symbolizes man's unity with the divine, wherein the dancer rotates constantly and transcends time and space into a mystical, spiritual realm. Here, the circle would represent or signify the cycles of the cosmos, eternity of life, and connection with the divine- a concretization of spiritual and religious experience. In contrast, the circle in Chinese classical dance is harmony with nature, symbolizing unity between heaven and humanity and a balance between yin and yang. Chinese classical dance is radially shining with respect for nature in every circle movement and stage arrangement, reflecting such a Daoist philosophy as "following the way of nature." In such a way of thinking, the circle is not an aesthetic form but reflects cultural ideals, signs of life cycles, social harmony, and spiritual completeness.

As for the expression form, the circle can be reflected in the forms of Sufi Whirling and Chinese classical dance with their respective characteristics. The whirling in Sufi, whirling is a circular movement repeated continually to create one continuous circle, both done and expressed. The art form of Chinese classical dance has widely employed circular movements on many occasions- the flooding stretch of one's limbs, minute spatial arrangement, and even circle formation in group dances. They create complex, whirling gestures full of spatial

layering and emotional depth through the curling of arms, moving of the waist, and motion of feet. While the circular form adopted by Sufi Whirling is dynamic and in constant change, grounded in the idea of flow and eternity of the spirit, in Chinese classical dance, the circle reflects fluidity because of continuous motion or stability and perfection because of static posing. This formal difference reflects the two cultures' distinct understandings of time, space, and existence while also reflecting very specific cultural contexts and norms related to religion (Sufism) and performing arts (Chinese dance).

Living in today's globalization, dance as an art of cultural interaction is getting a new vitality through trans-cultural fusion and innovation. The circle form, in both Whirling Sufis and Chinese Classical Dance, bears great connotations within their respective cultures and constitutes a rich resource for inspiration in the trans-cultural dance creation. The choreographers can also introduce to their work circular elements from various cultural traditions and further the circle's expressive potential in danced performance by offering the dancers new ways to investigate the movement within a variety of cultural frames. Such innovations across cultures reveal great respect and understanding for cultural diversity. The circle figuratively no longer stands for just one culture's symbol but has become a bridge to dialogue and exchange among various traditions in contemporary dance. Through comparison and integration, similar circular dances in other cultures may share meanings with dancers and audiences in an artistic dimension, allowing views to begin to open to global dance development.

3. Creating within the "Circle"

This chapter is mostly dedicated to describing the process and strategies I adopted for incorporating the issue of the circle into somatic practices and choreography. In so doing, reflection upon the extended notion of the circle and research and choreography related to

circle dances become inextricably linked throughout the process. Interestingly, although the circle embodies the idea of perfection, the human body cannot achieve a perfectly circular movement without external aid. This contradiction exposes a struggle between the ideal nature of the circle and the physically unquestionable reality of bodily movement. As such, the following inquiry into circular movements is grounded on a broad and general conceptualization of the circle, considering both its ideal and the limitations that are implicit in trying to realize it with the human body. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that improvisation has been an integral part of my movement research and choreography. Through the circle in dancing and its application in the creative process, I explain the specific role of the circle in using space, expressing feelings, and constructing art. Based on the purpose of exploring transcultural methods for creation in the circle, this paper is supposed to give reference and support to others who are in the same period of exploration and creation.

Improvisation as a Primary Method

I believe improvisation is something fleeting and changing; it is a broad and complicated phenomenon that is widely applied across various fields. It is a means of demonstrating immediate emotions through spontaneous movement vocabulary independent of any restraints such as space and music. It is also a tool in the making of physical movement, enabling dancers to access more closely states of bodily perception. At present, Improvisation has become one of the massive fields of study for many dance educators. It has also been referred to as an exploratory and practical creative activity where many creators often get endless inspirations and surprises. As improvisation continues to be embraced by artists, it is fast growing as a new form of dance performance. But let us remember that, due to the indeterminacy of its results, dancers often require much practice to make rewarding choices in the instance of improvisation itself.

Furthermore, the results of improvisation are at least not entirely accidental; they are often closely tied to the dancer's physical archive—encompassing their personality,

background, habits, and physical training—all of which provide clues for reverse analysis. Within this research, improvisation has not only been used as a tool to experiment with movement but also, taking the basis from my creative concept, which was included in the choreography and construction of movement logic during the piece. Improvisation greatly supported my practice during my movement research.

Spatial properties and the center of body movement

During the practical process, the relationship between the body and space, as well as the consideration of the body's center in movement, profoundly influenced my actions. First, there are two ways to define space: rationally and emotionally. When I stand in an enclosed space, the boundaries the limits of the space are revealed and then become the physical space with rational thought. Nevertheless, when I close my eyes, those physical boundaries appear to dissolve. This happens because visual information that provides the limits does not reach my brain, and imaginative space opens to emotional thinking. In creating and practicing dance, there are two intertwined and interrelated levels of working on something: rational and emotional. Just as words we write can either form a technical manual or coalesce into poetry, the latter often undergoes and produces a similarly poetic imagination and emotional process. This emotional process arouses each of them to create and reflect on one's particular space of emotional thought. Individual spaces imagined may differ, but these again could develop unique connections between people in physical space. In dance, the relationship between creating should verge towards integrating rational and emotional consideration of space.

In my dance education and choreography, my understanding of spatial elements began during my undergraduate studies in China, particularly in choreography courses. Our instructors taught us to effectively use the high, middle, and low levels of space in movement selection and consider the relationships of proximity and distance within the space, which is largely based on rational thought about three-dimensional space. However, I have considered space from additional perspectives throughout my artistic practice. I

believe that each work has its unique spatial characteristics. During the creative process, it is crucial to clearly define the nature of the space—whether it is physical versus imaginative, private versus public, visible versus invisible, and so on. Clarifying the construction of space can effectively assist creators in organizing and applying their creative elements.

I often set points within the body and space as centers to guide bodily movement, which has led me to reflect on the concept of the body's center. Based on my personal experience, the center of the body is typically located in the abdominal area, specifically in the pelvic region and in front of the spine, according to an anatomical perspective. Similarly, in Chinese classical dance training, the “Dantian” is often emphasized as the core of movement. The “Dantian” is located approximately three finger-widths (around 3-5 cm) below the navel in the abdominal region. Additionally, there is the concept of the feet serving as the center of weight for bodily movement. In dance, the movement and positioning of the feet are crucial for achieving dynamic balance. Dancers continuously adjust the position and weight distribution of their feet to maintain balance during complex movements. However, it is important to note that in contemporary dance movement development, the body's points of contact with the ground are no longer limited to the feet; various parts of the body can also serve as aids for movement.

In a workshop co-taught by Andrea von der Emde and Elena Luptak, titled “Heart Awareness in Contemporary Dance,” they introduced the concept of the heart as the center of bodily movement. Through the Franklin Method, an imagery-based somatic technique combined with applied anatomy and personalization, they explored the embodiment of the mind. This theoretical approach emphasizes the heart's crucial role in emotional expression, energy flow, blood circulation, and respiratory coordination. While traditional dance training typically considers the core muscles as the center of movement, the heart, both as a symbolic and physical center, offers a unique perspective and approach. By viewing the heart as the connection between the body and the mind, dancers can enhance the expressiveness of their external movements by tapping into the internal flow within the

body. These three perspectives on the body's center have all contributed to my practice, with the concept of the heart as the center particularly highlighting the importance of internal awareness and flow in dance.

3.1 Circle Movement

Here, I define circle movement as actions in which an individual uses their body to create circular or arc-shaped trajectories. Such movements are prevalent in dance, sports, daily life, and other physical activities. In everyday life, many actions align with the concept of circle movements, such as hugging, walking in circles, or stirring food. In dance, circle movements are even more common. For example, in ballet, the "Rond de Jambe" involves the dancer drawing a circle with one leg on the ground or in the air. In Chinese classical dance, the male movement known as "rubbing the ball" involves the dancer twisting their hands or arms to form a shape as if holding a ball. Examples like these are abundant in dance. Compared to other geometric shapes, I believe the circle is the simplest and quickest shape that the body can create, which is inherently linked to the circle's smooth, rounded nature. In this study, I focus on the potential of movements by designing improvisational tasks that involve setting different focal points for circle movements, aiming to explore the diversity and logic of these actions.

Improvisation Task Design

In practice, I categorize circle movements into two parts: the body's circle and the space's circle. The distinction between these two lies in the different points that guide the movement. When the body serves as the circle's carrier, a more rational perspective is adopted, with the body's self-generated movement being both the core and the condition. The joints of the limbs are treated as the center or starting point of the movement. Therefore, breaking down and analyzing each movable joint of the body is particularly important in this context. This step involves the use of Laban notation to analyze the body's structure. As shown in the diagram (Figure 5), this structural diagram not only effectively

demonstrates the relationship between Labanotation symbols and the body but also provides a method for analyzing the composition of body movements. In addition to the body components shown in the diagram, I have also included facial elements such as the eyes and tongue, as well as the subtle bodily movement of breathing. Based on these considerations, I have developed the following improvisation tasks. These tasks are all based on the premise that the dancer must on place, drawing circles within the range of their joints or movement scope, without shifting their body or walking.

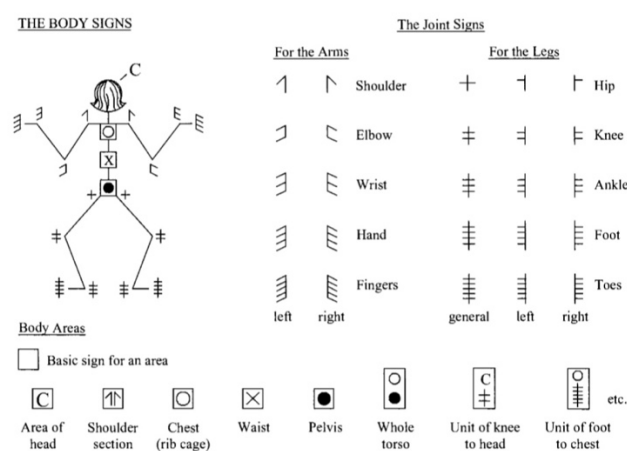


Figure 9. Laban Notation: GLOSSARY OF SYMBOLS

(1) **Smallest Circle:** Dancers are required to use different joints and, through subtle control and precise movements, present the smallest possible circle within their range of motion. Here, the concept of “smallest” is a conceptual guideline, reflecting the demand for heightened body awareness and control.

(2) **Largest Circle:** Dancers are encouraged to use various parts of the body to create the largest possible circle within their range of motion, emphasizing expansive movement and the body’s flexibility. Like the smallest circle, the “largest” is also a conceptual guideline, based on the dancer’s own capabilities.

(3) **Circle Size Levels (1-5):** Circles are categorized into levels based on their size, ranging from 1 (smallest) to 5 (largest). Dancers gradually increase or decrease the size of the circle

according to these levels. Each level should have a distinct size difference, maintaining smoothness and continuity in movement, with each circle displaying complete circularity. Transitions between levels can be sequential or random.

(4) **Speed Restriction:** Dancers explore circle movements under specific speed constraints, demonstrating control and fluidity at various speeds while investigating how different speeds affect the circle movements. Speed conditions can vary, such as the slowest, constant, fastest, or gradually increasing from slow to fast.

(5) **Continuous Circle:** After completing one circle movement, the dancer must continue with the next circle movement, always following the trajectory of the previous circle, emphasizing continuous flow.

(6) **Developing Circle:** Starting with one circle movement as the initial point, dancers develop subsequent circle movements by involving other connected body parts. For example, a finger circling can lead to wrist rotation, or eye movement can guide head rotation, gradually expanding from small to large circles.

(7) **Dance Style Restriction:** Dancers select a specific dance style, such as ballet or Chinese classical dance, and improvise circle movements within the basic movements and stylistic framework of that genre. The task requires maintaining the dance style's characteristics and technical demands while exploring circle movements.

In the context of the circle in space, there is a greater emphasis on the role of emotion, mainly utilizing the dancer's imagination to construct various circular spatial models that influence the generation of dance movements. In this module, the dancer's personal experiences and consciousness play a significant role, allowing the deconstruction and reconfiguration of elements and space through imagination, freely defining these constructs. As Sartre (2010) pointed out, "The unreal is produced outside the world by a consciousness that remains in the world and it is because we are transcendently free that we can imagine"

(p.186). In this process, the body becomes an intermediary that connects the real world with the imagined world, and the shared understanding of world exploration can be one of the ways in which observers read and comprehend these symbolic expressions. I have provided a diagram below illustrating spatial points, which effectively demonstrates my requirements for setting circle points. Assuming a cubic space, points can be positioned in entirely different locations—on the floor, walls, corners, etc. Any point within the space can serve as a trigger for dance movement. Based on these conditions, I have developed the following improvisation tasks. These tasks combine bodily movement with imagination, aiming to inspire dancers to explore creativity within space and deepen their understanding and expression of the circle as a fundamental form.

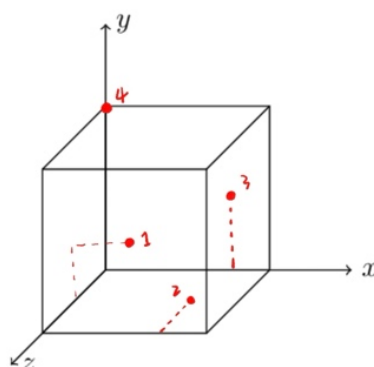


Figure 10. Space point diagram

(1) **Circle Drawing:** By setting multiple centers in space, guide different parts of the body to draw circles. Explore the diversity of circle drawing by varying speed, force, and rhythm. Imagine using different “drawing materials” such as water, fire, light, or air, and investigate how these elements affect the quality of movement. Try to engage the whole body in the drawing process, rather than limiting it to the hands or feet. The setting of circle centers can follow two approaches: (a) Pre-set fixed points that cannot be changed during the process, emphasizing the training of different body parts; (b) Continuously set points during movement, highlighting the role of conscious thought in guiding motion.

(2) **Circle Path:** Define a circular or overlapping circular path on the ground, and use the feet, arms, or other parts of the body to trace and move along this path. Dancers can experiment with varying speed and direction to explore the effects of different rhythms on the circle path, considering how the size of the circle offers varying conditions and degrees of freedom in movement.

(3) **Circular Objects:** Place objects with circular characteristics in the space, such as balls, clocks, or hoops. Explore and express these objects through different movement techniques, such as tossing, rolling, or circling around them. Dancers can emphasize the perception and expression of the weight, texture, and movement properties of different circular objects. Alternatively, dancers can interact with imagined objects, such as envisioning themselves interacting with a giant ball, feeling its presence through touch and movement, or imagining themselves as a clock.

(4) **Colored Circles:** Dancers are required to express different colored circle movements with their bodies, where each color corresponds to a different emotion and energy. Colors can be pre-assigned characteristics, such as red representing passion and strength, or blue representing calmness and tranquility. Alternatively, only the color information is provided, allowing the dancer more space for imagination. During improvisation, change the color of the circle to explore how transitions between different colors influence the quality and variation of movements.

(5) **Circle Domains:** Set up circular fields of different sizes in the space, each with its own properties, such as imbalance, lack of air, or flowing water. The size of the fields can correspond to different levels, with the center defined as the point of maximum intensity, gradually decreasing in influence outward. Imagine being within these circular boundaries and explore how to move within these domains.

(6) **Circle Universe:** Combine the above improvisation tasks to create your own imagined circle universe. Different conditions can be combined and used together.

Review and Reflection

The improvisation tasks designed for both the body's circle and the circle in space can be combined and adapted based on actual circumstances. These tasks are rooted in the study of the circle as a fundamental form in dance and its potential application in bodily movement. The circle, as an omnipresent shape, guides dancers in discovering the potential of their bodies and in creating rich movement trajectories in space. Through these improvisation tasks, dancers' bodily awareness and imagination are stimulated. These tasks go beyond simple imitation of the circle; by setting different scenarios and conditions, they highlight the dancer's flow of consciousness and creative expression, allowing them to find unique ways of bodily expression during the tasks.

For this practice, I mainly invited two undergraduate students from Anton Bruckner Private University. They are from Taiwan, studying contemporary dance in Europe, and have some training background in Chinese dance. I chose long skirts as their practice attire because the skirts naturally form flowing circular trajectories when in motion, reinforcing the circle's imagery. Additionally, the fabric of the skirts interacts with the air during movement, creating various dynamic effects. This interaction not only provided the dancers with more movement inspiration but also allowed them to explore richer movement expressions through the skirt's swirls and flows, emphasizing the shape and rhythm changes of the circle. I also view the unpredictable dynamics of the fabric as an external symbol of the dancers' inner unconscious activities. Furthermore, I shared and experimented with this research with my fellow master's students, who come from different countries and dance backgrounds, all with extensive dance experience.

I want to begin by emphasizing the unique role that body awareness plays in this context. Bolm and Chaplin (1988) explains, "The physiochemical high engenders a psychological high; together they make a potent brew, yielding a rarified perception of self" (p.3). Although I tried to clearly articulate my tasks and used my own bodily practice as a case study, different dancers still exhibited varied states when attempting the same

improvisation task. This made me realize the difference between understanding a task and how it is expressed in practice. It also highlighted the possibility that each dancer's unique imaginative space contributes to these differences. This distinction became particularly evident when combining small movements with fast speeds. On one hand, you could clearly see the differences in how each dancer's body responded to the peak speed. On the other hand, the application of the concept of "smallness" within the body also varied among individuals. When these two factors combined, you might witness one dancer continuously generating different dynamics, with movements that, although small, were precise and clear. Alternatively, you might see another dancer standing still, eyes closed, fully immersed in their own body. When these two phenomena appeared simultaneously before my eyes, it was a magical moment for me.

Secondly, recognizing the importance of embodied experience is crucial. "Direct experience creates tacit knowledge embedded in the body's response system, where perceptions and responses interact to form a complex understanding. This system includes not only kinesthetic responses but also sensations, psychological awareness, mental images, and kinetic phenomena" (Blom & Chaplin, 1988, p.16). The significance of embodied experience lies in its role in building a dancer's tacit knowledge base. Through direct bodily experience, dancers unconsciously accumulate a rich repertoire of movement memories and response patterns, which naturally emerge during improvisation. In the improvisation of circle movement, I noticed that my dancers instinctively favored clockwise circular motions. This tendency was particularly heightened when accompanied by fluid music, which seemed to amplify the frequency of such movements. This preference may stem from their bodily memories, habitual movement patterns, or psychological comfort zones. This discovery made me realize that in improvisational creation, dancers often unconsciously rely on their existing embodied experiences and habits. While this can enhance the fluidity of movements, it may also limit the diversity and innovation in their creative expression.

Working against this inertia, I asked the dancers to be aware of circle changes in the direction of their circle movements; I urged them to investigate counterclockwise circles and challenge the habitual pattern that the body had established. In improvisation, at opportune moments, I made verbal suggestions and gave cues. I also used music by John Cage called *Music of Changes*, which, with its randomness and indeterminacy of structure, has an unpredictable end. Cage used *I Ching* hexagrams and chance operations in his composition, lending an indeterminacy and fluidity to the music. With such indeterminacy, the dancers of improvisation would be thrown into alertness and continuous change that breaks them from their rhythmic and structural habits and moves them to new ways of creating movements. In these ways, with these two conscious practices, there was expansion in the movement vocabulary of the dancers- the deepening of their embodied experience of improvisation with circular movements- which continued. What this unusual training did was take the dancers' expressiveness to new heights while simultaneously increasing their flexibility and agility in improvisation.

In improvisation centered on imagination, the mental images formed through bodily experience exert a powerful influence. Dancers can transform these mental images into physical movements, expressing inner imagery through their actions. Imagination not only provides dancers with limitless expressive possibilities within the confines of physical space but also helps them transcend natural bodily habits, accessing deeper realms of creativity. During improvisational tasks, dancers create rich inner worlds through imagination, such as envisioning a virtual space composed of circular paths, objects, and domains. Every movement within this imagined space takes on new meaning—dancers are not merely navigating physical space but exploring and presenting an internally constructed circular universe. This construction infuses their movements with inner logic and emotional depth, far beyond mere mechanical execution. The role of imagination in improvisation goes beyond creating new movement pathways; it also redefines space, time, and self-perception. For instance, when imagining a circular domain, a dancer might “sense” its boundaries through movement or “discover” new pathways within it. This process of sensing and

discovery is central to improvisational dance, allowing dancers to transcend the limitations of physical space and explore multi-dimensional movement possibilities.

As an observer, I noticed a frequent gap between the internal constructions dancers create through improvisation and how these are interpreted by the audience. The imagination and imagery that dancers build during improvisation are deeply rooted in their unique bodily experiences, emotional states, and personal associations. When these mental images are translated into movement, they may be influenced by the dancer's physical habits, technical abilities, or modes of expression, leading to potential divergences between what the audience perceives and what the dancer originally intended. Additionally, the audience's interpretation is shaped by their own experiences, backgrounds, and psychological states, meaning the same movement might be imbued with different meanings by different viewers. This diversity of interpretation enriches the expressive power of improvisational dance but also highlights the subtle differences between dancer expression and audience understanding. I believe this gap is not a failure of the dancer's expression; rather, it is where the unique charm of dance lies. The openness and non-linear structure of improvisational dance allow and encourage multiple interpretations, making each improvisational performance a unique interactive experience between dancer and audience.

In the experiment involving the integration of specific dance styles, I primarily attempted to introduce Chinese classical dance into improvisational creation. During this process, the dancers exhibited circle movement languages that were distinct in style and technical characteristics. However, as the experiment progressed, the dancers tended to repeatedly use classic movements or techniques from this genre, leading to a certain monotony in their improvisational expressions. Additionally, the experiment revealed that dancers need in-depth training and understanding of the dance style being integrated; simple combination teaching is insufficient for fully mastering the style's unique body rhythms and technical requirements. This limitation can cause improvisational creation to

remain superficial in terms of technique, making it challenging to deeply explore the intrinsic essence of the dance style. While the constraints of a specific dance style can provide beneficial structure and direction, aiding dancers in delving deeper into a particular style, they can also limit creative freedom and diversity of expression. The key lies in balancing these constraints with the freedom inherent in improvisation—utilizing the advantages of limitations while avoiding potential drawbacks to ultimately achieve an organic fusion of technique and creativity.

Through this experiment, I not only observed the dancers' creativity in bodily movement but also appreciated the diverse expressions they displayed when confronting challenges in body and space. Purposeful and logical improvisation practice helps dancers develop a systematic way of thinking about movement. The tasks effectively stimulated the dancers' flow of body awareness, especially in breaking existing movement patterns and exploring new pathways. These tasks provided a framework that allowed dancers to freely explore within certain constraints. The combination of rationality and emotion played a crucial role in this experiment, enabling dancers to establish dual pathways of internal exploration and external expression. The concept of the circle created a dynamic connection between different tasks, providing dancers with a cohesive practical thread. This experiment offers concrete methods for improvisational dance practice centered around the concept of the circle. Of course, the current experiment primarily focuses on the exploration of individual movements and has yet to address the complexities of duo or group collaboration. I believe future research can further explore how to design improvisational tasks in more complex situations, deepening the understanding of the interaction and integration between circles, the body, and space.

3.2 Case Study: Axis

*Axis*⁹ is a 10-minute solo dance piece created and performed by me, in collaboration with composer and electronic music performer Gerard Erruz, bass clarinetist Dácil Guerra Guzmán, and trumpet player Nikola Vukovic. In the creative process, we started with the concept of the circle, allowing it to influence the work from both the auditory and movement dimensions. Through the interplay with the circle, we sought to connect reality and imagination, attempting to explore a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world. The concepts of the axis and circular motion guided the creative process from multiple perspectives: they were inscribed in the movements on stage, metaphorically expanded within the soundscape, and served as a link between these two forms of expression, enabling them to develop and work in synergy throughout the piece. We explored various perspectives of a single circular motion, from the apparent stillness at the axis to the intense momentum at the farthest reaches, to reflect our interaction with the perception of reality.



Figure 11&12. *Axis*

From the perspective of the choreographer, I divided this piece into three parts. The first part is illuminated with warm-toned lighting, with movement tasks primarily consisting of developing circular movements and the flow of circular actions through space. In this section, the musicians are positioned at the front left of the stage. The second part is guided by the sequential appearance and dynamic blending of red, yellow, and blue lighting, which

⁹ *Axis* (2024) - Invisible Drives #10 KUG project

leads to different movement tasks, accompanied by the musicians' purposeful movement across the space. The third part features cool-toned lighting, with movement tasks that include vigorous running along circular paths, interactions with electronic music marked by struggle and breathing, and a final improvisational task involving a return to the starting point. During this process, the musicians gradually reduce their movement in the space, and as the return-to-origin task begins, they position themselves at the front left and back right, forming a diagonal line with the dancer. In this piece, I have envisioned the circle in this work as a symbol of entrapment. Using my personal bodily archive as a transcultural entity, I explore the themes of freedom and constraint. Through the form of the circle, I aim to depict the individual's oscillation between tranquility and struggle. The circle, like the ripples caused by a stone dropped into a lake, gradually expands, forming layers of invisible constraints. The symbolism of the circle as a cage is reflected in four key aspects:

The Body as a Cage

In this work, I view my body as a closed circle. The body, in this context, acts as a limitation—whether through physiological constraints or the cultural and societal norms and expectations imposed upon it, the body becomes a form of confinement. The circular movements and trajectories in the piece metaphorically represent the body's repetitive cycles within predetermined paths. Through the endless presentation of circular motions, I intend to express the body's cyclical entrapment within established patterns, conveying a reflection on and resistance to bodily limitations. This bodily cage is not only physical but also psychological, reflecting the various constraints and inescapable dilemmas individuals face.

The Cage of Circle Creation

The circle, as an inspiration, simultaneously becomes a limiting condition that intertwines with the entire creative process. In this work, the exploration of circle movements from different dimensions becomes the central element of the choreography,

forcing me to create and perform within the confines of the established circular form. This limitation is both a challenge and a boundary, compelling the creator to seek new modes of expression within the circle's constraints. This process reflects the contradiction in creation: the desire to transcend the limits of form while being compelled to create within its framework, illustrating the exploration of the relationship between freedom and regulation in artistic creation.

The Cage Built by Performers for Performer

The musicians' circular movement paths in the space form an invisible arc wall, further restricting the dancer's freedom. Their presence and movement trajectories create "forbidden zones" on stage, subtly shaping the dancer's range of movement and modes of expression. This limitation suggests the influence of external factors in creation, such as how concepts, environments, and others' actions impose invisible constraints on individual expression. The musicians' paths act as an insurmountable barrier, forcing the dancer to explore within a predetermined range and hindering complete freedom of expression. This invisible wall symbolizes not only the physical constraints of space but also the various external restrictions in the creative process.

The Cage Between the Audience and Performer

The gap between the audience and performer creates another form of a two-way cage. Whether it's the physical distance on stage or the psychological distance between the audience and the dancer, this separation generates limitations in the "viewing-performance" relationship. During the performance, these two entities—like two outward-expanding circles—seek compatible and overlapping parts. This also limits the expression of the work to what the audience can understand and accept. Meanwhile, the audience's expectations and interpretations become an invisible constraint for the performers, forcing them to find a balance between catering to the audience and self-expression.

Through these four aspects, the circle is not only a geometric shape but also a symbol that reveals the multiple constraints individuals face in their bodies, creation, space, and social relationships. These cages are both reflections of reality and projections of the inner self, representing the various unseen shackles and challenges individuals encounter in their pursuit of freedom and breakthrough. The preliminary improvisation practices based on circular movements guided the selection of movements throughout the entire piece. In this work, I also integrated the outcomes of improvisational tasks, such as continuous circles, developing circles, and circular paths. I deconstructed, reorganized, and refined these tasks to create material that aligns with my conceptual vision. The performance begins with the dancer's routine warm-up activities, using the twisting of the wrist as the entry point, which prompts the dancer to reflect on the continuity and expansiveness of circular movements. The use of three different colored circular lights further deepened this exploration, connecting the attempt to use the bodily archive as a trans-cultural entity. These choices reflect my profound contemplation of the interplay between freedom and limitation within the creative concept.

Yellow Light: Choreographed Movements

Under the yellow light, the dancer is asked to perform preconceived circular movements. Yellow here represents the rule and tradition of representation of the movement in fixed and stylized manners. Such a setting should, therefore, limit the improvisation of the dancer with performances under the tight framework. With this choreography, one can see precision in movements and full representation of circular form. This, too, enhances the formalization of the movements to highlight the process of seeking perfect artistic expression that strives to achieve within constraints.

Red Light: Improvisation of the "Circle" in Chinese Classical Dance

Red symbolizes the bonds of lineage and cultural heritage. In the second part, through improvised circular movements with Chinese classic dance techniques, the dancer explores

and express their cultural roots. Just like the flow of blood in the human body, the red lighting links the dance movement and the innermost cultural identity of the dancer. This kind of lighting not only fills the dancer with emotional passion but also strengthens the role of the dancer in the transmission of culture. Every circle of movements carries the exploration of the dancer's cultural identity, vibrating deep in culture through cycles and extensions of the movements. Even though constrained by the norms of the dance style, the dancer is allowed more autonomy under the red light. Such improvisation accentuates how tradition and innovation contradict each other, challenging and breaking through established forms to reflect a moderate expansion of freedom.

Blue Light: Individual whirling

Blue here symbolizes tranquility and infinity, representing the broadest freedom. Inspired by Sufi Whirling, under the blue light, the dancer is allowed to spin freely, moving according to their own desires and impulses. At this moment, the dancer is no longer constrained by predetermined choreography or traditional technical frameworks, their movements flow entirely from their emotions and present state. This segment of the performance emphasizes the extreme of freedom, where the dancer, through the intertwining of rotation and blue light, expresses the natural flow of inner emotions and the infinite possibilities that arise.

The three-colored lighting setup not only provides the performer with varying degrees of freedom but also subtly reduces the rigidity of movement norms. The yellow, red, and blue colors correspond to different creative concepts, creating layers that allow the performer to emotionally express themselves within different ranges of freedom according to their state. In the latter part of the piece, I use the imagery of running desperately along a circular path to symbolize the invisible and limited nature of life's cage. The emotional struggle is a metaphor for the helplessness and contradictions of human nature. Ultimately, the body's continuous movement perhaps speaks to the present unease and helplessness; embracing oneself becomes both a release and a reconciliation with oneself and the world.

Certainly, for me, the language of the body is an abstract one. I cannot fully capture and express the entirety of my body's potential and possibilities, nor the nuances of feelings and emotions, with words alone. Similarly, every choreographic idea will inevitably leave behind gaps, omissions, and spaces during its expression, but I believe that these absences will foster imagination and diverse interpretations in the "dialogue" with the audience.

The element of the circle is not only reflected in the choreography but is also deeply integrated into the stage design and musical performance. For instance, the circle movement of sound within the performance space is achieved through a multi-channel speaker system. This design leverages the fluidity of sound in space, enhancing the audience's sense of immersion through circular sound pathways. The piece premiered under a dome of 24 speakers, where sound, like ripples, circled the space along a predetermined path, aiming to immerse the audience in a dynamic circle composed of sound. In this setting, the audience is not merely passive observers but active participants, with their gaze and attention being guided through the space as the sound moves, as if they are part of the circular dance created by sound and movement. This setup can be adjusted according to the number and arrangement of speakers in different venues, ensuring the circle motion of sound is maintained.

The performances of the two musicians are also intertwined with the concept of the circle. The circle movements generated during their playing not only interact with the electronic music in real-time but also create circular paths through their movement within the performance space, influencing the choreography. This circular movement, combined with the flow of sound, creates a multi-layered interaction, where the soundscape, shaped by the circular motion of music in space, resonates with the dancer's circle movements and the changing lights. A crucial detail to note is the musicians' focus of attention; during the performance, their gaze directed towards the dancer on stage helps to provide a cohesive focal point for the overall presentation, further concentrating the performance energy. Through a multi-angled layout and setting, the work's multidimensional presentation of the

circle element is enriched. Sound, movement, and lighting interweave within the space, creating a complete artistic experience. This circular integration is not merely a formal choice but a means of expressing the work's core concept through multiple sensory dimensions.

Axis aspires to create a performance that surrounds the audience with sound and movement and subtly pushes them into a cyclical, repetitive experience. We tried to escape from the linearity of the story in traditional performances and instead created a circular, open artistic space based on the circle. Within this performance space, circular dance and rhythm continue to deepen the audience's perception and emotional experience, making the viewer feel the tension of freedom and constraint expressed in the work more deeply. The multi-perspective use of the circle factor in this piece creates a rich, multilayered artistic expression wherein the interaction and mutual influence among different components eventually create a complete, multi-sensual experience. This inclusive circle of repetition not only strengthens the theme of the work but also creates a completeness of immersion in performance.

Conclusion

From the analysis of meaning taken by the circle in language and text to the creation of the dance piece *Axis*, the cycle is complete. This research tries to light the guiding role of the circle in artistic practices to find its transcultural influence in dance creation. By conducting a deep analysis of the integration and application of the circle within multidimensional fields, the research presents varied symbolic meanings of the circle within cultural contexts, extendedly being awarded the potential core creative element in artistic practice. Thus, this paper compares the development and expression of Sufi Whirling with that of Chinese Classical Dance to illustrate the circle as a significant link between bodily dynamics and cultural expression. It underlines how the circle plays an important bridging role in creating

trans-cultural dance. Using selected learning materials from a trans-cultural context, this study proposes an artistic practice approach centered on the circle, with improvisation as the primary method. Through specific creative case studies, the paper further illustrates the critical role of the circle in trans-cultural creation.

The findings indicate that humanity's philosophical reflection and exploration of the circle throughout history have established it as a versatile medium for humanistic and artistic expression, fostering innovation and development in dance through trans-cultural exchange. In some specific dance forms, the circle is more than just a movement language; the circle is a symbol of spiritual devotion and a particular aesthetic style. In practice, this circle shows its comprehensive influence on artistic composition, which plays the first fiddle in increasing expression and inclusiveness in dance, demonstrating its universal applicability in dance creation within a trans-cultural context.

Theoretically, this research advanced a new vision in the aspect of trans-cultural research in dance theory and broadened the theoretical frame of the circle as an element in artistic creation. This research does not only indicate the symbolic significance and application of circular elements across different cultures but also proposes a creation method based on improvisation dance practice. This approach underlines the flexibility and creativity of dance creation, hence offering choreographers new ways of trans-cultural expression. With this approach, the choreographers can explore, in an improvisational dance way, elements of circularity from different cultures freely and organically and integrate these into their choreographies in a creative manner that is artistically innovative and reflects respect for and understanding of cultural diversity.

Looking ahead, this study represents an important theoretical and practical foundation for further exploration of the trans-cultural application of circular elements in creative dance. However, this study has mainly focused on practical exploration at the solo dancing level, therefore underlining the individual process of exploration and creation. This proves that in dancing, circular movements can be widely applied and have a profound meaning at

the personal level of creation while at the same time showing that in future research, not only at this level but also at the social and group levels, exploration will have to be carried out. Future research could be done to show how circular elements in group dancing represent social relationships, collective consciousness, and cultural identity. In researching group dance, the use of circular elements can represent the relationship between the individual and the whole while reflecting several value systems within the social culture and, in the process, provide a far richer perspective and new avenues of research into the development of the dance art.

In conclusion, this study offers new perspectives and methodologies for trans-cultural creation in dance by deeply exploring the trans-cultural application of circular elements in dance creation. By organically integrating circular elements from different cultures, dance not only enriches artistic expression but also fosters understanding and resonance between cultures. Continued exploration of circular elements in broader cultural and social contexts in future research will present new opportunities and challenges for the development of dance art.

Bibliography

- Blom, L. A., & Chaplin, L. T. (1988). *The moment of movement: Dance improvisation*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Bocken, I. M. K. (2023). The Dance of the Sufi. 81.
<https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/handle/2066/301159>
- Cassirer, E. (1992). *An essay on man: An introduction to a philosophy of human culture*. Yale University Press.
- Cirlot, J. E. (1995). *A Dictionary of symbols* (2. ed., repr). Rotledge.
- Emerson, R. W. (1841). *Essays*.
- Euclid. (2008). *Euclid's elements of geometry: The Greek text of J.L. Heiberg (1883 - 1885): from Euclidis Elementa, edidit et Latine interpretatus est I.L. Heiberg, in aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1883-1885* (R. Fitzpatrick, Ed. & Trans.; Revised and corrected). s.n.
- Foster, S. L. (1986). *Reading dancing: Bodies and subjects in contemporary American dance*. University of California Press.
- Franz, M.-L. von. (1980). *Alchemy: An introduction to the symbolism and the psychology*. Inner City Books.
- Friedlander, S., & Uzel, N. (2003). *Rumi and the whirling dervishes: Being an account of the Sufi order known as the Mevlevis and its founder the poet and mystic Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi* (1st Parabola ed). Parabola Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F., & Di Giovanni, G. (2010). *The science of logic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Laozi. (2014). *Tao te ching* (S. Mitchell, Trans.). Harper Perennial.
- Lima, M. (2017). *The book of circles: Visualizing spheres of knowledge*. Princeton Architectural Press.
- Mao, W. (2020). 浅析原始舞蹈的文化特征——以青海大通舞蹈纹彩陶盆为例. *Yi Shu Ping Jian*, 19, 67–69.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2010). *The imaginary: A phenomenological psychology of the imagination*. Routledge.

-
- Shirakawa, S. (2010). *Chang yong zi jie* (Di 1 ban). Jiu zhou chu ban she.
- Su, Y. (2015). *中国古典舞学术述评* (First Edition). 中国文史出版社.
- Tang, M., Li, Z., & Huang, J. (1991). *中国古典舞身韵*. 浙江美术学院出版社.
- Tenzin Tshering. (2000). *中国民族民间舞蹈集成. 西藏卷 [Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Collection. Tibet Volume]* (First Edition). Zhongguo ISBN zhong xin : Xin hua shu dian Beijing fa xing suo fa xing.
- Wilcox, E. E. (2018). Dynamic Inheritance: Representative Works and the Authoring of Tradition in Chinese Dance. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 55(1), 77.
<https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.55.1.04>
- Xu, S., & Tang, K. (2018). *Shuowen Jiezi* (Beijing First Edition). 中华书局.
- Zhu, L. (2006). *中国艺术的生命精神*. Anhui Education Press.

Image collections

Figure 1 Kandinsky, V. (1926). *Dance Curves: The Dances of Palucca*. In *Kandinsky and the dance of the future*. Matteo Mascolo.

<https://en.matteomascolo.com/post/kandinsky-and-the-dance-of-the-future> (Accessed August 10, 2024).

Figure 2 Kandinsky, V. (1926). *Several Circles* [Painting]. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1992> (Accessed August 15, 2024).

Figure 3 *Dancing Figure Painted Pottery Basin*. (n.d.). National Museum of China.

<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%96%B0%E7%9F%B3%E5%99%A8%E6%97%B6%E4%BB%A3%E8%88%9E%E8%B9%88%E7%BA%B9%E5%BD%A9%E9%99%B6%E7%9B%86/10770193> (Accessed August 20, 2024).

Figure 4 Coolcaesar. (2015). *The Shanghai Grand Theatre in Shanghai, People's Republic of China* [Photograph]. Wikimedia Commons.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shanghai_Grand_Theatre#/media/File:Shanghaigrandtheatre.jpg (Accessed September 10, 2024).

Figure 5 Klem, & Mnmazur. (2007). *Yin and Yang symbol* [Vector Image]. Wikimedia Commons.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin_and_yang#/media/File:Yin_and_Yang_symbol.svg (Accessed September 10, 2024).

Figure 6 Anonymous medieval illuminator, & Pelecanos, T. (1478). *Ouroboros drawing from a late medieval Byzantine Greek alchemical manuscript* [Drawing]. In *Codex Parisinus graecus 2327* (Fol. 279). Manuscript attributed to Synesius of Cyrene and Stephanus of Alexandria. Uploaded by Carlos Adanero, 2007, from

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/71/Serpiente_alquimica.jpg (Accessed September 10, 2024).

Figure 7 Associated Press. (2022). *Whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi Order perform during a Şeb-i Arus ceremony in Konya, Türkiye* [Photograph]. Daily Sabah.

https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/whirling-dervishes-pierce-millions-of-hearts-with-rumi-s-mysticism/news?gallery_image=undefined#big (Accessed September 10, 2024).

Figure 8 Zeng, M., & Yu, K. (Eds.). (2018). *Chinese Classical Dance: Shen Yun*. Southwest Normal University Press.

Red lines are drawn by the author.

Figure 9 Guest, A. H. (1983). *Your move: A new approach to the study of movement and dance: Teacher's guide* [Figure: Laban Notation: Glossary of Symbols]. Gordon and Breach Publishers.

Figure 10 *Space Point Diagram*. This figure was created by the author.

Figure 11 & 12 *Axis*. (2024). Photographs by Elias Choi-Buttinger.