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## Original Research Article

# Study on the forms, features and methods in the study of Chinese ancient dance iconography

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### ABSTRACT

The study of iconography has been an important method in the study of Chinese and Western history and art, and there is a long 'academic tradition' of iconographic research dating back to the 20th century. Today, the study of art iconography continues to be a hot topic of research worldwide, with new research findings coming from different countries and crossover approaches. Chinese ancient dance art has a great influence all over the world. This paper analyzes the research characteristics and research paradigm of Chinese dance images from Art history perspectives. The specific research content of this paper includes visual actions, lines or symbols to record and reflect the performance and reproduction of dance images. This way of discourse is basically divided into two aspects: visual expression and meaning. Similarly, At the same time, it will also bring many references to other related research.

## Introduction

### The academic history of Western iconographic theory

The study of iconography mainly refers to the systematic research of Chinese and Western scholars who have taken images as their objects and carried out iconographic analysis, iconographic interpretation, and reconstruction of the meaning of images since modern times. The study of images has been a concern of ancient artists and literary critics since ancient China and was developed in the flourishing “Jinshi” studies of the Song dynasty (Bol, 2003). The study of images in ancient China focused more on the analysis of paintings and calligraphy and on the psychological motivations of their creators, as well as on the sociological significance behind them (Clunas, 2009) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Haiyoujian inspiration in Suining County, Xuzhou city, Jiangsu Province

The entry of iconography into modern research horizons, especially in the past hundred years, has been the early stage of the study of images in China since the Song Dynasty and in the West in recent centuries, such as the analysis of iconography and religious images (Elkins, 2007). From the 'pictorial' analysis of religious objects and themes, iconography gradually moved into the study of the meaning of images and cultural theory (Mitchell, 1986). From its conception in the 19th century, it took shape in the 20th century. With the efforts of scholars such as Warburg, Panofsky, W.J.T. Mitchell, and Gottfried Böhm, modern iconography established its academic position, philosophy, and disciplinary system (Warburg, 1999; Panofsky, 1955; Mitchell, 1986; Boehm, 2007).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Western iconography became more accessible and broadened, entering almost every aspect of art historians' and sociologists' research, becoming the most influential research method and rapidly spreading throughout the world (Boehm, 2007). The study of iconography in China began in the 1980s, and with the focus on Western academic thought and research methods, it also began to learn from this new paradigm of art historical research (Wu, 2010). Representing figures such as Wu Hung, scholars began to think about the multiple counterpoint and multidimensional interpretation of meaning in iconography within traditional research. And in the following forty years, a great deal of valuable results and Chinese experiences were achieved. Research on the Chinese experience of art studies and the

history of various disciplines of art and art archaeology has also had several phases in the four decades of the new period (Wu, 2010). From the study of the West in the 1980s, to reflection and wandering around the new century, to the breakthroughs of the last decade, the study of Chinese iconography has also gradually developed a local character (Clunas, 2009) (**Table: 1**).

Iconography period	Identity	Time	Personage	Representative	Contribution of iconography	The source or time of the theory	
Conception	Classicist	778 - 1841	Friedrich Ast	Hermeneutical pioneers	The techniques of textual interpretation present three levels.  The textual or syntactic level, the historical level (focus on meaning) and the cultural level.	1808 Hermeneutics 1808	Panofsky and his partners apply the unique tradition of German interpretation text to the interpretation of images". (Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence P47)
Formation	Art Historian	892 - 1968	Erwin Panofsky	Representative of modern iconography	The methodology is divided into three steps: "pictorial", "pictorial analysis" and "pictorial interpretation".	Iconography research: the humanistic theme of Renaissance art. 1939	Image is an integral part of the overall culture" (image history p48). At the same time, pan also ignored art and civilization, trying to find special significance in the "social history".
Development	Art historian	909 - 2001	E. H. Gombrich	Representative of modern iconography	It criticizes Panofsky's image theory, takes the author's intention as the interpretation object of iconology, and determines the only verifiable significance of the work.	1972 Gombrich on the Renaissance: Symbolic Images 1972	The symbolic meaning of image is discussed by comparing image with language
In-depth	Art historian	1942 --	W. J. T. 米歇尔  W. J. T. Michele	Representative of postmodern iconography	A study of visual culture, with concepts such as the "image turn" and the "meta-image".	Iconology: Image Text Ideology 1984	Michel believes that the image turn is an extended thinking from the two important directions of art history shown by Panofsky and Gombrich.

**Table 1:** Development history of iconography

There are four main characteristics of Chinese iconographic research: first, the increasing emphasis on local and traditional methods (Liu, 2011). Second, the greater attention to the Chinese attributes of the research object (Sun, 2010). Third, the establishment of the cultural

dimension and aesthetic context of Chinese images (Jiang, 2013). And fourth, the construction of an academic discourse and theoretical system for iconographic ontology (Mitchell, 2018). With the archaeology of fine art, art iconography, music archaeology and music iconography, as well as more categories of iconographic research gradually forming their own academic coordinates, an overview of the two decades of iconographic research in the new century has yielded remarkable results and a wealth of writings (Wu, 2010) (Xu, 2014). At this point, it has become imperative to construct a Chinese academic discourse system and build a Chinese art theory system, as well as a disciplinary system of iconography, and to put forward new goals and missions in contemporary art theory research (Panofsky, 2011; Wang, 2012) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Rubbings of Han Dynasty stone statues in Yanan, Shandong province

## Literature Review

### The research paradigm of dance iconography

There are a large number of descriptions of dance in China's thousands of years of history and vast classics. The dance image depicted on the painted pottery basin unearthed in Qinghai indicates that as early as the Neolithic period, people could express their thoughts and habits by depicting the scene of dance, proving that in China thousands of years ago, people had the custom of singing and dancing on the ground and were able to draw it in daily necessities (Li, 2001). In the Han Dynasty, the custom of thick burial was greatly promoted by the people and the court. A large number of cultural relics excavated from their tombs provided rich Han portrait stone bricks depicting dance scenes, showing that people hoped to have music and dance even in another world (Jin, 2006). Various mysterious flying dance images with different postures unearthed from Dunhuang Grottoes murals and Sutra caves filled the dance with infinite reverie at that time (Wu, 2010). The popularity of photos and images in modern society greatly affects the recording of movements. The dancing posture can be easily fixed on the screen and become a dance image or even a dance icon (Burke, 2018). The dance images of ancient China mainly exist in murals, stone carvings, calligraphy, and painting. Among them, Han portraits, dance enthusiasts, and grottoes are the main images. Roughly during the Han Dynasty (Eastern Han Dynasty) in China, the relationship between artistic image expression and reproduction changed from reproduction depiction to expression creation (Liu, 2011).

Limitations and debugging of the method. The method needs to be established and injected with the characteristics of dance. When we study images, how to establish such a scheme, or how to construct the academic system of "dance iconography" and how to express the discourse system. Of course, the discipline system is more complex and is a systematic project, which is the basis of the first two. Image, including internal image and external image. The image system includes symbol, body, and art, and several systems are integrated. The image system and image representation always hide the attributes and traces of specific

society, society, aesthetics, and characters. The ultimate goal of iconography research is to solve the problem of dance and serve dance, which is of great significance to dance history, dance performance, and creation (Mitchell, 2018). The value standard is that iconography is a means and cannot deviate. Iconology is a method. Back to the method itself, the ultimate purpose of image research is not image ontology. In a broad sense, text includes two aspects: image and text. In Chinese traditional narrative habits, the two are supplemented and combined, which is called "graphic style" (Panofsky, 2011). Among them, the presentation of images focuses on "video," and words, as interpretation and expression, focus on interpretation and philosophy (Wang, 2012).

Text is also a concept of comprehensive text. Image and text are mutually independent. In history, many images are created based on literary texts. Image texts are also annotations and postscripts to images (Xu, 2014). Symbols are the theme content of dance images. In the picture, form and content, symbols occupy the absolute research center. At the essential level of images, the deep interpretation of symbols in dance images is the key to the interpretation of formal beauty and meaning (Yu, 1992). Text includes both image recognition and text text. It mainly refers to the text representation associated with images. The importance of image and text has been debated in the West as early as the middle and late last century. Some scholars want to compare the position of image with text through the rise of iconology (Mitchell, 2006).

Image theme, i.e., theme or theme. It means the object reproduced or imaged by the image object, i.e., physical image, is "the physical properties such as texture, color, and graphics of printed paper, photos, or oil paintings" (Clunas, 2009). To better understand the relationship of "image," we can use the help of explanation. The so-called image is used to describe the characteristics of "present (imaginary) behavior, so as to correspond to the self-display as the present possession (perception), which can be translated into" image " (Elkins, 2007). Therefore, there are imaginary components in the image object that need to be analyzed. "The three methods of expressing Chinese culture follow a certain pattern, but it does not prevent us from transmitting many details about Chinese culture." "stereotype" comes from the word plate. It can be used to copy images, which is synonymous with the word "cliche" in French. The use of this word can make us have realistic associations with the relationship between the visual image and the image in our mind. The formula itself may not be wrong, but it tends to exaggerate some features of the facts and erase others (Gadamer, 1989). Usually, people's intuitive perception of images starts with physical images. For example, when you see the sunflower in the painting, it immediately corresponds to the sunflower image in real life; When there is no direct counterpart in reality, it enters the construction of "image object" (Warburg, 1999). This construction is based on prototype and imagination. Gadamer calls this behavior of imitating prototype "primitive order." For example, when we see the long-sleeved dance image of the Han Dynasty, because the world has not seen the dance of the Han Dynasty (the presence of History), we need to complete the reproduction in a sense through this construction (Bol, 2003) (Figure 3).



Figure 3: to 8 show the dance image in the image

### Objective

The primary objective of this research is to explore and analyze the unique characteristics of dance imagery in contrast to other forms of visual representation. This study aims to investigate how dance-centric image design integrates and highlights the interplay between dance and various visual elements within an image. Specifically, the research will focus on the following.

#### 1. Examining the Multi-Dimensional Nature of Dance Imagery

To analyze how dance imagery functions as a compressed space-time system, presenting both the dancer's perspective and the viewer's perspective, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of image dynamics.

#### 2. Investigating Values and Aesthetics in Image Construction

To explore how values and aesthetics guide the creation of dance imagery, and how these elements contribute to the metaphysical reconstruction of the image's form, ultimately impacting the cultural representation of the dance.

#### 3. Understanding the Logical Relationships in Dance Imagery

To delineate and interpret the three layers of logical relations within dance imagery: the relationship between the image and its elements, the correlation between the image's content and its broader context, and the ultimate expression of the image's meaning.

By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how dance imagery can be effectively constructed and interpreted to reflect and enhance cultural and aesthetic values.

## Research Methodology

### Analysis of methods and characteristics of dance imagology

#### Research methods and levels

Dance image is different from other images and its research is mainly reflected in the image design centered on dance and highlighting the relationship between dance and various elements of image in the overall image. Image itself is a multi-dimensional system. It is a compressed space-time, presenting everything in the image from the first perspective or the perspective of others.

In the construction of physical images, it is not difficult to find that the final guidance of images should be the guidance of values and aesthetics in the image body (image dance), and complete the reconstruction of metaphysical body in the construction of form, so as to achieve the comprehensive reconstruction of cultural body. In the research, three layers of logical relations are formed: image and its image elements - image content and its correlation - image meaning and its ultimate expression (**Table 2**).

<b>1. 图像意义 Image meaning</b>	
Dance temperament, style and characteristics	Ruler's will, view of history and values
<b>2. 图像关联 Image association</b>	
Life, clothing, architecture and technology	Body discipline and inertia expression
<b>3. 图像身体 (图像舞蹈) Image body (image dance)</b>	
Figurative action, symbolic allegory	Dance features, morphological patterns

**Table 2:** Three aspects of dance image

In the study of art history, there are three main methods: stylistics, iconology and sociology. There are different settings among different studies and schools. Dance iconography is to integrate the advantages of the three, for example, art and dance itself under style, image under image, culture and history under society.

For the understanding of image and image dance, dancers or viewers often obtain it through "vision", and the next level is intuition. A few people complete the image appreciation through comprehensive evaluation, synaesthesia, history and other "professional background". The visual center is established, which ignores and obscures other information of the dance

image. We should try to obtain association from vision and establish comprehensive feeling in "auditory perception", "image perception" and "intention perception" in order to obtain dynamic feeling in static state. The primary level is the harmonious relationship between vision, senses and holistic view. The first nature of image is to receive and convey through vision. The visual discussion of image has not stopped since the establishment of iconology. Visual reception is that the viewer can understand the image, props and shape of dance in the image. Basically, viewers tend to understand the form and situation of image dance from their own perspective and with their own experience. A few people consider it from the image itself or the original intention of the creator and image generation. The analysis stage of iconography is the elaboration of the "symbolic" value world composed of essential meaning and content. There is a certain unity and commonality between the interpretation of the final cultural connotation proposed by panovsky in iconography theory and the symbolic meaning of Han painting images. Intuitive or metaphorical, concrete intuitive expression and hidden content and metaphorical problems.

### Dance image features

Any art research, including cultural research and social research, is composed of a large number of facts and data, and qualitative analysis is obtained in quantitative research. The study of dance images is also inseparable from the analysis of specific dance matters, such as the image of characters, movement vocabulary, dance scenes, clothing props, the relationship between dance and music acrobatics, dance accompaniment and so on. Each of these aspects can be further analyzed. The specific features are as follows.

1. Records in the general sense embody the form, carrier and specific content.
2. The response in the ideal (symbolic) sense implies people's expectation and pursuit of life, aesthetics and philosophy in the past. Many actions on the image are both performance and idealized exaggeration, which have been transformed in the process of artistic creation (production).
3. "Metaphor is a systematic description of unformed experience by borrowing the experience formed at the language level".
4. "Visual discourse assumes the role of metaphor and plays the function of metaphor, which ensures the transformation of the subject's ideology into the pictorial object world".
5. The hiding of image meaning, the repositioning of image perspective and the three-dimensional space of body reset: return to the historical context, return to the voice structure and return to the whole image.

### Result

Aspect	Findings
Dance Image Meaning	<p>Dance Temperament, Style, and Characteristics</p> <p>Dance images reflect unique temperaments, styles, and characteristics of the dancer, conveying deeper cultural and aesthetic values.</p> <p>Ruler's Will, View of History, and Values</p> <p>Dance imagery often mirrors the values and historical perspectives of the era, including societal norms and authority.</p>

Aspect	Findings
Dance Image Association	<p>Life, Clothing, Architecture, and Technology</p> <p>Dance images incorporate elements such as clothing, architecture, and technology to provide context and enhance cultural understanding.</p> <p>Body Discipline and Inertia Expression</p> <p>Emphasizes the physical discipline and movement dynamics of dance, revealing the technical and emotional aspects of the performance.</p>
Dance Image Body (Image Dance)	<p>Figurative Action and Symbolic Allegory</p> <p>Utilizes figurative actions and symbolic allegories to convey complex ideas and emotions, adding metaphorical depth to the imagery.</p> <p>Dance Features and Morphological Patterns</p> <p>Highlights the specific movements and forms of dance, contributing to the aesthetic and symbolic meaning of the image.</p>
Additional Findings	<p>Visual Perception and Intuitive Understanding</p> <p>Initial engagement with dance imagery is often visual, but deeper appreciation requires integrating auditory, visual, and intentional perceptions.</p> <p>Iconographic Analysis</p> <p>Combines stylistics, iconology, and sociology to understand symbolic value and cultural context.</p> <p>Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis</p> <p>Employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze character images, movement vocabulary, and contextual elements.</p>

The results emphasize the distinct nature of dance imagery compared to other visual forms. They highlight how dance images encapsulate unique characteristics, historical values, and symbolic meanings through their representation. The integration of life elements, body dynamics, and symbolic actions provides a comprehensive understanding of the dance's cultural and emotional depth. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of combining visual, auditory, and contextual analyses to fully appreciate the multidimensional aspects of dance imagery. These findings demonstrate the complex interplay between visual representation and cultural expression in dance.

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## **Discussion**

The research into dance imagery has elucidated the unique aspects that set it apart from other forms of visual representation. Dance images are inherently multidimensional, capturing the essence of movement, emotion, and cultural context in a compressed space-time framework. This study highlighted the critical role of visual perception in understanding dance imagery, where initial engagement is often through vision, but deeper appreciation requires an integration of auditory, visual, and intentional perceptions. However, the analysis revealed that dance imagery is a powerful medium for conveying cultural values and historical perspectives. The embodiment of dance temperament, style, and characteristics in the imagery reflects the underlying cultural and aesthetic values. Moreover, the association of dance with life elements such as clothing, architecture, and technology enriches the viewer's understanding of the dance's context and its societal significance. Iconographic analysis aspect proved invaluable in interpreting the symbolic content of dance images. By integrating stylistics, iconology, and sociology, the study provided a holistic understanding of the imagery, emphasizing both the symbolic meanings and contextual interpretations. This approach underscored the importance of considering both the form and content of dance images to appreciate their full cultural and aesthetic impact.

## **Conclusion**

In the image research of ancient China, a significant number of images adhere to a specific program that reveals the expression of order step by step. This order encompasses the coordination of things and relations, including cultural order, social order, and the natural order of heaven and earth. It is evident that Chinese images, including dance images, embody this order system. Art research, whether cultural or social, is fundamentally composed of extensive facts and data, with qualitative analysis derived from quantitative research. Similarly, the study of dance images necessitates the analysis of specific dance elements. Each aspect can be further scrutinized, and the gradual interpretation of the micro-world in dance images facilitates the systematic analysis of specific themes and images. This forms the foundation for understanding image elements and their significance.

Today, iconography and image research exhibit remarkable adaptability and have intersected with various disciplines. The essential attribute of an image is to record and convey. Through the vast expanse of history, we can appreciate the art and civilizations of the past through the remnants of images. The core question remains: what do dance images aim to express, and what was the ultimate purpose of the ancients in depicting these images? This profound inquiry is crucial for unlocking the ultimate value and purpose of dance image research.

## **Recommendation**

Multidimensional analysis is future research should continue to employ a multidimensional approach to analyze dance imagery, incorporating visual, auditory, and contextual perspectives. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and static elements of dance. Cultural and Historical Context, researchers should place greater emphasis on the cultural and historical context of dance images. Understanding the era, societal norms, and cultural values during which the dance was created will deepen the interpretation of its imagery. Integration of Analytical Methods, the integration of stylistics, iconology, and sociology should be expanded in future studies. This combination has proven

effective in uncovering the symbolic and cultural significance of dance images and should be further developed. Educational Programs, educational programs in dance and visual arts should incorporate training on the interpretation of dance imagery. This would help dancers, choreographers, and art students to better understand and create meaningful dance images that convey deeper cultural and aesthetic values. Technological Advancements: Utilize advancements in technology, such as virtual reality and augmented reality, to create immersive experiences of dance imagery. These technologies can enhance the viewer's perception and understanding of the multidimensional aspects of dance. Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between dance practitioners, visual artists, and cultural historians. This will foster a richer exchange of ideas and methodologies, leading to more nuanced and comprehensive analyses of dance imagery.

By addressing these suggestions, future research and practice can enhance the understanding and appreciation of dance imagery, highlighting its unique ability to convey complex cultural and aesthetic values through visual representation.

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