

## Discussion on Role and Functions of Props in Dance

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### Abstract

The props always play an important role in dance works, including national folk dance, modern dance, classical dance, and ballet, etc., and more and more attention is paid to the application skills of props. The dance props can enhance the expressive force of dance works, depict characters' inner world, create typical stage environment, convert the space and time, decorate stage color, and enhance dance atmosphere and dance rhythm. This paper will carry out analysis and discussion on functions of props in dance from macroscopic perspective.

**Key words:** Props; Dance; Application

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### INTRODUCTION

The prop is a kind of common phenomenon in dance creation and performance, and it is prevailing from ancient times to the present. With social development, the dance props are also changing. As an organic part of creating dance image, the dance props often play an important role in dance works. Actually, since the labor produces dance, the props are closely related to dance. In ancient times, people dance with wooden ware and stone tools beating. However, as the time goes on, the dance props of different nationality and different local feature are formed due to difference in geographical environment, politics and history, religious faith, and folks. Different prop can reinforce different theme and shape different figure.

## 1. CULTURAL OVERVIEW OF PROPS IN DANCE

### 1.1 Definition of Dance Prop

The dance prop is defined as the prop made for dance works, and it is an organic part of the whole dance work. Meanwhile, the dance prop can play a role in shaping figure and dance style, and it is a powerful tool which enhances the environmental atmosphere of whole stage. Besides, the prop can create the artistic image with unique charm in charm. The dance prop is the symbol of many kinds of abstractness and contains broad symbolizing connotation.

### 1.2 Development and Evolution of Dance Prop

#### 1.2.1 Dance Props in Primitive Society

The dance props in primitive society are very single, for the primitive dance is a kind of primitive cultural form of human beings and it is not a conscious entertainment or artistic creation. As for the origin of primitive dance, Chinese and foreign scholars have different understanding. The main opinion in Chinese dance history research is that the labor creates human's shape of body, and especially creates human's thoughts, which makes the dance become a kind of culture different from animals' instinct action and also endows the dance with the function of reflecting objective world; however, it can't be said that the dance merely originates from labor, and the origin shall also include other life activities of non-productive labor, such as war, love, and sacrifice.

The props of primitive dance are generally daily necessities without specially-made dance props, and the common props are stone tools and wooden ware, all of which generally reflect productive labor or labor-related praying activity; such kind of dance is just the imitation of some labor production process by virtue of dance props. People in primitive society hold the religious faith of "animism"; due to low level of social productivity and frequent natural disaster at that time, people believe that

there is a kind of “supernatural” force which controls them. Therefore, they worship nature deities and hopes good weather for the crops in the next year; in the worship ceremony, the wizard and dancing people often use such props as animal skin, animal horn, feather, grass skirt, oxtail, shield and axe.

### 1.2.2 Dance Props in Modern China

The modern time of China refers to China from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1980s. In this period, due to political influence, the changes have happened in modern Chinese dance and props. The dance props in this period inherit the excellent tradition of dance props in ancient China, and the new dance props are also developed with social change and development. Those changes happen after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. The dance props in this period can be generally divided into 3 stages:

(a) Dance props in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China: The props in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China are developed on the basis of Chinese operas and ancient song and dance; in the long-term development and evolution process, some dances are stylized, some dances are transformed, and some are completely reserved, such as sword dance, silk dance, and sleeve dance. Nevertheless, props such as water sleeve, sword, and hand fan are used.

(b) New dance props after the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement: The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919 fiercely attacks feudal morality and feudal culture, and raises the social ideological trend of seeking for new thoughts, new culture, and new knowledge. Under influence of this ideological trend, great changes have happened in dance props. In this period, the Soviet Union dances such as Ukraine Dance, Caucasus Dance, Sailor Dance, and International Dance are widely spread; furthermore, with reference to the experience of the Soviet Union, a batch of new dances which reflect Chinese workers, peasants, and soldiers’ life, such as Workers’ Dance, Peasants’ Dance, Youth Dance and Soldiers’ Dance.

(c) Dance props in socialism period: On one hand, the props in this period are inheritance and development of Chinese thousands-of-years dance culture; on the other hand, they are the promotion of revolution dance tradition since May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, and also borrow ideas from beneficial experience of dances of countries in the world, thus the dances with Chinese characteristics, multiple forms, and multiple styles are created in this period.

### 1.3 Dance Props in Current China

With social development, the dances such as modern dance, ballet, belly dance, and street dance enter into China, and the props are not limited to a hand fan or a water sleeve any more. The things which can express the dancer’s feelings or enhance the theme of dance works can be all applied into dance as “props”.

## 2. FUNCTIONS OF PROPS IN DANCE

### 2.1 Functions of Props in Chinese Modern Dance

The modern dance emerged in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning, it was the mother of modern dance Isadora Duncan’s revolutionary impact on status of old-fashioned and rigid classical ballet at that time. She thought that the dancers should make their body integrated with their soul, and control their feelings of soul. However, as for Chinese modern dance, to a broad sense, it seems that the dances without specific folk style or classical form can be included into “Chinese-style modern dance”. Nevertheless, Chinese modern dances are also the works which extract dance language from life, reflect social and historical events people are concerned about, and have distinct realistic style, and there exists obvious difference from creative ideas to expression forms.

In Chinese traditional dances, the application of props mainly focuses on reflecting the artistic conception and harmony between human and things. For example, the sleeve and sword reflect taste, elegance, texture, and modeling, thus there is the saying of lofty sword and quiet and beautiful sleeve shadow; the dancers’ personality spirit is contained in dances, and the props reflect the dancers’ upper-class social status. In modern dance, the application of props is not simple extension of body or “expressing feelings via things”, but to make dances become more metaphorical and abstract. People generally think that the most important role in dance work is the dancer; actually, the prop has an equal position with the dancer in the dance. As for the application of props in modern dance, due to no restraints of tradition, they can be freely applied. Therefore, the treatment of props in modern dance makes many “yes” become “no”, and makes many “impossible” become “possible”. In modern dance, the props generally exist as a kind of abstract form; they are not simply providing dance condition for dancers in order to shape one figure, but using their own symbolic significance and the thoughts and feelings they deliver to make a dialogue with dancers in a more direct and stronger way.

The functions of props in Chinese modern dance are to let the dance become richer in the third dimension and layering sense; they can enhance dance atmosphere, and make dance language more vivid, which naturally enhances the artistic conception of emotion. The highest state shall be able to cause audience’s multiple associations, that is to say, a simple prop in the work can let the audience get multi-level way of reading and understanding, and this feature of being capable of causing audience’s association is just the extension of props.

### 2.2 Functions of Props in Chinese Folk Dance

There are 56 nationalities in China, thus the kinds of props involved in each kind of folk dance are diversified.

In order to know the difference in folk dance of each nationality, it is required to know the origin and background of props applied in each kind of folk dance. Meanwhile, the clothing and props of each nationality are all a kind of symbol of national culture.

Main props of 5 nationalities:

### 2.2.1 Tibetan Nationality

Reba dance in Tibetan dance is performed by hereditary wandering artist in folk. The small bell and yak tail, single-handle drum and long drumstick in tambourine dance are main props.

### 2.2.2 Han Nationality

The main props include “drum”, “stick”, and “umbrella” in Shandong drum yangko, plate drum in Anhui flower-drum lantern, handkerchief flower and fan flower in northeast yangko, and props in Guangdong Yingge dance, Ansai waist drum, Hunan flower-drum, and south Liaoning stilts, etc..



**Figure 1**  
**The Town Lane**

### 2.2.3 Korean Nationality

The performers of long-drum dance carry stick drum, hold bamboo stick to beat drum head with both hands, and dance with beating drum. In elephant-cap dance, the dancers will wear special helmet on which there is convoluted long rope; while the dancers shake their heads, the long rope will rotate and fly on the top of head or beside the body. The longer the long rope is, the higher the skill is, and sometimes the dancers will take small drum and beat it for performance.

### 2.2.4 Wei Nationality

The plate dance is commonly called “bowl dance”; upon performing, the dancer holds a plate on both hands respectively, and holds chopsticks with fingers, and then the dancer dances and rotates while beating the plates, and also heads the bowl with water.

### 2.2.5 Mongolian Nationality

In chopsticks dance, the dancer will hold a handful of chopsticks with single hand or both hands on the spot, and smoothly swing two arms to use chopsticks to beat hands, waist, leg, and other parts. In the peace drum dance of Mongolian dance, the dancer shall horizontally hold drum

handle by left hand and hold a stick with ear by the right, and then perform the dance upon beating.



**Figure 2**  
**Bowl Dance**

If the props can be skillfully applied, they can make one dance work sparkle at one specific time, bring people with enlightenments, excitement, and beautiful enjoyment, make people appreciate a kind of beauty of spiritual sentiment from enjoyment of artistic beauty, and make people produce a kind of deep love to society, which can play an education function of artistic works. However, if the props are improperly used in national folk dance and even paint the lily, it is easy to damage the aesthetic feeling of dance and make a stupid mistake.

The props always play an important role in dance. Some dances establish their style due to addition of props, some dances are named based on the name of props, and some dances even will not exist if they are separated from props. The application of props in dance is an ancient problem. Since the labor produces the dance, the props are closely related to dance. The reason why the props are used in some dances is to enrich dance vocabulary, enhance expressive force of dance works, indicate the dance environment and enhance atmosphere, and tprops are always used as the media for foreshadowing and driving dance plot and the tools of depicting figures' personality. Those things which originate from ordinary articles in our life are endowed with rich expressive force under the producers' exquisite selection, skilful clipping and flexible application.

With social development, people's appreciation level is gradually improved, and the functions of props in adapting to story, enhancing the atmosphere, and enriching the performance will be more prominent, and also become more universal. Therefore, we need to keep exploration and research on innovative application of more props.

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