
Keys to a Successful Modernization: Case Study on the Choreographic Transformation of Haiyang Yangko

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Abstract: Haiyang Yangko, a traditional folk dance recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage of China, has undergone transformative developments in recent decades. As contemporary audiences seek more resonant and innovative artistic expressions, choreographers have been working to modernize Haiyang Yangko without compromising its cultural essence. This study investigates the key factors contributing to successful modern interpretations of Haiyang Yangko by analyzing select case studies and applying perspective and case analysis methods. Findings reveal that successful modernization hinges on thematic innovation, choreographic fluidity, audience engagement, and symbolic adaptation. These elements enable choreographers to honor tradition while creating emotionally engaging and visually compelling performances that resonate with today's viewers. This paper provides a theoretical and practical reference for choreographers, educators, and cultural policymakers dedicated to the preservation and reinvention of folk dance traditions.

Keywords: chinese folk dance; haiyang yangko; dance movements; transformation choreography innovation

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1. Introduction

Haiyang Yangko is one of the representative folk dance forms of Shandong Province, China, with a history rooted in rural communal life, seasonal rituals, and collective celebration. Traditionally performed during festivals, agricultural ceremonies, and social gatherings, the dance integrates movement, music, and role-based imagery to express local cultural identity and shared values. Over time, Haiyang Yangko has developed a relatively stable movement system characterized by grounded stepping, swinging dynamics, circular spatial pathways, and the extensive use of hand-held props such as fans^[1].

In recent decades, however, the transformation of social structures and performance contexts has significantly altered the conditions under which folk dance is transmitted and practiced^[2]. As Haiyang Yangko entered the professional stage, it faced the challenge of negotiating between inherited stylistic conventions and contemporary aesthetic expectations. Scholars have noted that many ethnic and folk dance forms encounter similar dilemmas, particularly when traditional movement systems are perceived as repetitive or insufficiently expressive within modern theatrical frameworks^[3]. Consequently, choreographers have increasingly explored ways to reinterpret folk dance materials through modern choreographic concepts while retaining recognizable cultural features.

This article examines how Haiyang Yangko has been transformed through contemporary stage choreography by

focusing on two representative works: *Moon in the Mood* and *Su Yue*. Rather than treating modernization as a rupture from tradition, this study approaches choreographic transformation as a selective and structured process^[4]. By analyzing movement vocabulary, spatial organization, prop usage, and expressive intention, the article aims to identify key mechanisms through which Haiyang Yangko is reconfigured for the modern stage while maintaining its cultural identity.

2. Case study analysis: modern works of haiyang yangko

2.1. The moon in the mood

Choreographer: Yuan Yuan

Performance: Department of Chinese Folk Dance, Beijing Dance Academy

Moon in the Mood was created by the Beijing Dance Academy for the 15th Beijing Dance Competition. Choreographed by Yuan Yuan and performed by Wang Xuerou, the work won first prize in the professional youth category and was later incorporated into the academy's national folk dance teaching repertoire. As a contemporary Haiyang Yangko work, it demonstrates how traditional movement language can be transformed within a modern stage context.

2.1.1. Theme

Rather than presenting a fixed narrative, *Moon in the Mood* adopts an abstract and open-ended thematic structure. The work evokes different emotional associations for different audiences, such as nostalgia, memory, or intimate affection. The fan functions as a central expressive medium, mediating emotional tension and inner struggle throughout the choreography. A defining artistic feature of the work is its emphasis on circular movement, which draws directly from the core aesthetic principles of Haiyang Yangko.

2.1.2. Movement materials

Moon in the Mood integrates Haiyang Yangko with modern and contemporary dance techniques. Through choreographic structure and emotional progression, the work depicts the psychological transformation of a Shandong woman from restraint to inner strength. The choreographer foregrounds the concept of “circle” as a key movement principle. In Haiyang Yangko, circularity is manifested through body inclinations, torso twists, winding pathways, and fan actions such as the wrapped-head fan and shading fan.

Despite the diversity of circular expressions, the dynamic logic of Haiyang Yangko remains grounded in three fundamental spatial trajectories: the flat circle, the vertical circle, and the figure-eight pathway^[5]. These trajectories shape the overall movement organization of the dance and provide continuity between traditional Yangko vocabulary and contemporary choreographic expression.

Dynamic rhythm is central to the visual identity of Chinese folk dance. Different regional dances exhibit distinct rhythmic characteristics shaped by body mechanics and cultural context^[6]. In *Moon in the Mood*, the dynamic qualities of lifting, wrapping, and twisting—commonly associated with Haiyang Yangko—are reorganized to create a continuous, flowing movement texture. This transformation demonstrates how traditional kinetic principles can be abstracted and reimagined for modern performance.

2.1.3. Use of props

The fan serves as the primary prop in *Moon in the Mood*, functioning as an extension of the dancer's body rather than a decorative accessory. Through coordinated rotation with the torso and arms, the fan helps trace flat and vertical circular pathways in space. Classical Haiyang Yangko movements such as the wrapped-head fan and figure-eight fan patterns appear throughout the first half of the work.

By extending arm trajectories and clarifying spatial routes, the fan amplifies movement range and enhances visual coherence. Combined with waist twisting, breath control, and rapid contraction–release actions, the prop reinforces the characteristic dynamic flow of Haiyang Yangko while supporting the expressive demands of contemporary choreography.

2.2. Su yue

Choreographers: Li Jiawen, Yuan Zhuma, Jie Lin

Performance: Dance School, Zhejiang Conservatory of Music

Su Yue is a modern folk dance work adapted from Haiyang Yangko. Drawing on the symbolic image of the fish and the action of leaping, the choreography constructs a metaphor for perseverance, renewal, and collective vitality within contemporary society.

2.2.1. Theme

Su Yue explores the dialogue between tradition and modernity through modern dance language and stage imagery. The recurring motif of the fish emphasizes both cultural rootedness and transformation. Through the struggle and forward momentum of the dancers, the work conveys resilience, courage, and the will to overcome adversity. Rather than literal storytelling, the choreography relies on symbolic movement to express collective spirit and emotional intensity.

2.2.2. Movement materials

The choreographic structure of Su Yue is compact and rhythmically driven. Movement design integrates Haiyang Yangko dynamics with contemporary ensemble techniques. Silk fans are manipulated to resemble fish tails, creating wave-like motion and visual continuity across the group. The dancers' physical demands increase toward the climax, testing both stamina and coordination while enhancing dramatic impact.

2.2.3. Use of props

In Su Yue, the fan inherits its traditional function from Haiyang Yangko while acquiring new symbolic significance. On stage, the silk fan not only enhances visual texture but also embodies the dual imagery of fish and leap. Its swinging motion simulates aquatic rhythm, while coordinated fan and body actions reinforce themes of struggle and renewal.

By combining traditional fan usage with modern dance techniques, the choreography expands movement vocabulary and strengthens symbolic expression. This adaptive strategy exemplifies how Haiyang Yangko can gain renewed vitality through innovative choreographic transformation^[7].

3. Key factors contributing to successful modernization

Building on the above case studies, several core elements can be identified as critical to the successful modernization of Haiyang Yangko. These include symbolic abstraction, choreographic innovation, emotional resonance, spatial dynamics, and the evolving role of props. Each element not only modernizes the visual and kinesthetic language of the dance but also deepens its thematic impact and cultural significance.

Symbolic Abstraction and Emotional Depth: Rather than relying on straightforward narratives, successful modern Yangko works use symbols such as the moon or fish to create abstract emotional landscapes. This artistic strategy allows audiences to project their own interpretations onto the performance, making it more immersive and personal. It also enhances emotional complexity by exploring internal conflicts, nostalgia, longing, and resilience.

Expansion of Movement Vocabulary: Modern adaptations enrich the traditional circular movement system of Haiyang Yangko by incorporating contemporary dance techniques such as release-based motion, improvisational gestures, floor work, and changes in body tension. In "The Moon in the Mood," the use of the figure-eight route and folding techniques elevate the expression of inner turmoil. In "Su Yue," aquatic qualities are expressed through modern movements that simulate the dynamics of a swimming fish.

Recontextualized Use of Props: In both works, the fan is transformed from a decorative folk symbol into an expressive choreographic device. It is used not only to support rhythm and movement but also to extend spatial trajectories, symbolize character transformation, and externalize internal emotion. The "wrapped head fan" and figure-eight pathways in "The Moon in the Mood," and the fluttering silk fans in "Su Yue," show how the traditional prop can powerfully adapt

to modern narratives.

Enhanced Stage Composition and Spatial Design: Successful modern works adopt layered spatial arrangements, solo-duet interactions, and symbolic use of space to create dynamic and meaningful stage compositions^[8]. In “Su Yue,” the group formations simulate fish schools navigating turbulent currents, while solo sequences highlight moments of personal strength. Spatial transitions reflect narrative arcs, from conflict to transcendence.

Rhythmic Complexity and Temporal Play: Traditional Haiyang Yangko features regular rhythmic pulses^[9]. In contrast, modern works like “The Moon in the Mood” incorporate breath-driven timing, silence, syncopation, and tempo shifts. These techniques add textural variety and emotional modulation to the performance, giving choreographers more expressive tools.

Reinvented Character Archetypes: Modern adaptations reshape traditional character models. For example, the cheerful village girl in traditional Yangko becomes a contemplative and resilient woman in “The Moon in the Mood.” This evolution reflects changing social values and deepens audience identification. These transformations align the dance with modern gender perspectives and individual narratives.

Cultural Continuity Through Innovation: While these modern works are visually and technically innovative, they maintain a strong connection to Haiyang Yangko’s cultural roots. This includes retaining its signature rhythm, prop use, and movement aesthetics while injecting contemporary themes and techniques. This duality ensures continuity without rigidity.

4. Discussion

The successful modernization of Haiyang Yangko lies not in rejecting tradition but in reinterpreting and reactivating its core aesthetics within contemporary frameworks^[10]. From the comparative analysis of “The Moon in the Mood” and “Su Yue,” we identify several interrelated strategies that contribute to the effective transformation of this folk tradition into stage-worthy, emotionally engaging, and artistically sophisticated works. These methods reflect a conscious effort by choreographers to construct new meanings from traditional resources, using innovation as a tool for cultural continuity.

First, symbolic abstraction plays a vital role. Unlike traditional Haiyang Yangko works that convey fixed narratives or celebrations, modern adaptations shift toward open-ended symbolism^[11]. In “The Moon in the Mood,” the moon serves as a poetic metaphor for inner longing and memory, while in “Su Yue,” the fish becomes a national allegory of persistence and transformation. These symbols function not merely as visual icons, but as flexible narrative cores that allow audiences to engage emotionally and intellectually. This abstraction technique enhances the dance’s communicative potential across diverse audiences.

Second, the innovative use of traditional props—particularly the fan—emerges as a key device for modernization. In both works, the fan transcends its decorative or ritual function to become a dynamic extension of the dancer’s body. Through swirling, folding, and spiraling, the fan traces emotional arcs, constructs spatial layers, and reinforces the visual identity of the choreography. This adaptive approach to props is not merely technical but conceptual, embedding tradition into a new symbolic system.

Third, spatial and rhythmic innovations significantly transform the kinetic language of Haiyang Yangko. The traditional reliance on circular formations and repetitive group patterns gives way to layered compositions, shifting stage dynamics, and complex rhythmical variations^[12]. For instance, “Su Yue” utilizes asynchronous group movements and wave-like floor patterns to mimic aquatic momentum, enhancing both visual and symbolic depth. Rhythmic shifts in “The Moon in the Mood” mirror internal emotional progression, introducing moments of tension and release. This interplay between rhythm and emotion marks a new choreographic grammar rooted in traditional energy but attuned to contemporary sensibilities.

Fourth, the reconstruction of character archetypes represents a modern humanistic turn in Haiyang Yangko. Traditional Yangko often emphasized caricature and extroverted expressions; however, modern pieces explore inner life, personal conflict, and subtle emotional transformation. “The Moon in the Mood” transforms the folk female figure into a vessel of

introspective strength and poetic solitude. “Su Yue” celebrates collective resilience through the metaphor of a migrating fish, portraying the dancers not as stock characters but as evolving emotional agents.

Fifth, fusion of movement vocabularies strengthens the expressive range of modern Haiyang Yangko. Choreographers incorporate modern dance elements—floorwork, off-balance motion, breath-driven movement—without severing ties with the essential twisting, circling, and rhythmical pulse of traditional Yangko. This stylistic hybridity respects the essence of the form while expanding its expressive vocabulary to accommodate contemporary themes and stage contexts.

Sixth, the success of modern adaptations is closely linked to the choreographer’s interpretive stance—how they understand and reshape tradition. Rather than imitating old patterns, they act as cultural translators, sensitively selecting, amplifying, and reshaping elements to resonate with today’s values and aesthetics. This active reinterpretation ensures that modernization is not superficial embellishment but meaningful transformation. The choreographer becomes a bridge between past and present, local and global, folk and formal.

Finally, these successful works illustrate the importance of emotional resonance in modernized folk performance. Audiences today seek affective depth, and the selected works meet this demand by balancing tradition with universal emotional appeal—longing, resilience, love, struggle. The emotional through-lines connect spectators with the dancers’ inner states, making the performance not only a cultural display but an empathetic journey.

Together, these strategies form a flexible but coherent model for transforming Haiyang Yangko into a contemporary performance genre. They illustrate that modernization, when grounded in deep cultural understanding and choreographic creativity, does not dilute tradition—it revitalizes it. As more choreographers experiment with this approach, Haiyang Yangko has the potential to remain vibrant, relevant, and impactful in China’s evolving dance ecology and beyond.

5. Conclusion

This study identifies multiple elements contributing to the successful modernization of Haiyang Yangko: symbolic abstraction and emotional depth, integration of traditional and contemporary techniques, reimagined use of props, spatial innovation, rhythmic variety, character reinvention, and cultural continuity through innovation. These components empower choreographers to create performances that resonate with modern audiences while honoring the legacy of folk traditions. As Haiyang Yangko continues to evolve, these findings provide a foundation for future creative and academic endeavors. The implications extend beyond dance, offering insights into how cultural traditions can thrive through adaptive reinterpretation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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