

From Tradition to Innovation: Modern Reinterpretation of Haiyang Yangko as a Cultural Heritage Dance

Lu Liu, Nurulakmal Abdul Wahid

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900 Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

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Abstract

Haiyang Yangko, one of the most representative folk dances of Shandong, China, has long embodied communal rituals and cultural identity. However, its rigid structure and repetitive vocabulary have limited its relevance in contemporary performance contexts. This paper examines the modern reinterpretation of Haiyang Yangko as a case of cultural heritage dance reimaged for the stage. Using ethnographic documentation, choreographer interviews, and case study analysis of selected works—including *Cherry Red*, *The Woman on the Other Side of the Mountain*, *Su Yue*, and *Red Coral*—the research explores how choreographers preserve traditional movement grammar such as swing rhythms, circular steps, and “three bends” body shapes, while innovating through narrative expansion, abstract symbolism, and new prop design. Findings show that successful modernization requires balancing cultural authenticity with aesthetic innovation, ensuring resonance with both local communities and contemporary audiences. The study highlights three critical factors: cultural resonance, performer versatility, and audience-centered staging. It argues that modern reinterpretations of Haiyang Yangko not only sustain its intangible cultural heritage but also expand its creative boundaries, contributing to broader discussions on tradition, innovation, and cultural sustainability in the performing arts.

Keywords

choreography; cultural heritage; folk dance; Haiyang Yangko; innovation

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1. Introduction

Haiyang Yangko, one of northern China’s three major Yangko traditions, is a Shandong Haiyang folk dance rooted in local life and culture. Emerging in the Ming and Qing dynasties, gaining national recognition in the 20th century, it is a national Intangible Cultural Heritage^[1].

Historically, it was more than entertainment—performed at festivals, weddings, harvests and rituals to express collective identity^[2], embody social values and strengthen community bonds, integrating music, movement and theater with symbolic roles (Da Fu, Hua Gu, Cui Hua, etc.).

Today, the dance faces challenges: its codified choreography (repetitive steps, stereotyped characters, limited themes) risks losing relevance for younger generations and audiences seeking innovation^[3]. This sparks debates on balancing heritage preservation and artistic modernization—authenticity for cultural continuity, and innovation for contemporary resonance.

This paper explores Haiyang Yangko's "boundary-reimagining" in modern stage choreography, addressing three core questions:

- (1) What are Haiyang Yangko's key traditional choreographic features?
- (2) How have choreographers integrated modern techniques, aesthetics and narratives to reinterpret these traditions?
- (3) What factors drive the successful modernization of Haiyang Yangko?

The study positions Haiyang Yangko in the broader discourse on performing arts' future, demonstrating that folk traditions are not static relics but living sources of innovation.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative case-study approach integrating ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and choreographic analysis. Qualitative research methods are particularly appropriate for investigating embodied cultural practices such as folk dance, as they allow for in-depth examination of movement systems, performance contexts, and creative processes^[4]. The case-study framework enables each choreographic work to be examined as an integrated artistic system rather than as isolated movement fragments, ensuring analytical consistency across cases.

2.2. Fieldwork and data collection

Fieldwork was conducted in Haiyang City, Shandong Province, over a two-year period. Community performances presented during the Spring Festival and temple fairs were observed to document Haiyang Yangko as a living folk practice embedded in everyday social life. Ethnographic observation focused on movement vocabulary, role typology, spatial organization,

and performer–audience interaction, drawing on anthropological perspectives on folk cultural ecology.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight dancers, six choreographers, and three recognized cultural heritage bearers. Interview questions addressed participants' understanding of traditional movement vocabulary, motivations for modern reinterpretation, creative challenges in staging, and perceptions of audience response. This contributing to an understanding of Haiyang Yangko as an actively transmitted cultural heritage.

2.3. Case study selection

Four representative choreographic works were selected using purposive sampling. Selection criteria emphasized artistic influence, professional recognition, and relevance to contemporary folk dance discourse. Two works (*Cherry Red* and *The Woman on the Other Side of the Mountain*) represent traditional-based adaptations, while *Moon in the Mood* and *Su Yue* exemplify modern reinterpretations that integrate contemporary aesthetics and symbolic expression.

2.3.1. Tradition

- (1) *Cherry Red* (1985) – a solo adaptation emphasizing Yangko rhythm and gesture.
- (2) *The Woman on the Other Side of the Mountain* (1999) – a group dance highlighting rural women's resilience.

2.3.2. Modern

- (1) *Moon in the Mood*. Choreographer: Yuan Yuan. Performance: Department of Chinese Folk Dance, Beijing Dance Academy.
- (2) *Su Yue*. Coreographers: Li Jiawen, Yuan Zhuma and Jie Lin. Performance: Zhejiang Conservatory of Music Dance School.

3. Data analysis

3.1. Tradition

3.1.1. *Cherry Red* (1985) – a solo adaptation emphasizing Yangko rhythm and gesture

Cherry Red (1985) is a women's group dance based on Haiyang Yangko, choreographed by Zhang Yinsong with

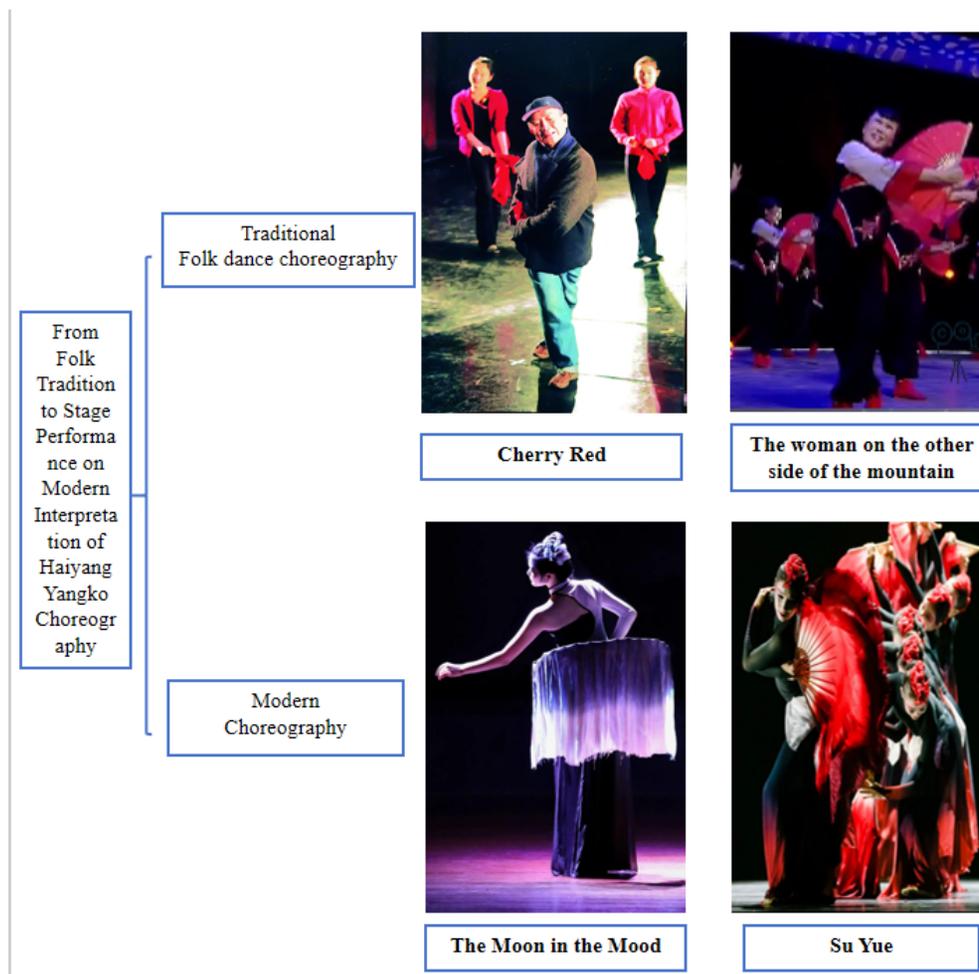


Figure 1. Traditional Folk-Dance choreography and Modern Choreography

music by Li Zhisheng and lyrics by Sun Hongwei. It won second prizes for choreography and performance at the 1986 2nd National Folk Dance Competition, as well as Shandong's top cultural award, the Mount Taishan Prize.

(1) Theme

Created in the early 1980s, this widely acclaimed mass dance reflects contemporary rural life with distinct style and strong timeliness. It depicts rural girls picking cherries joyfully, praising the new look, scenery and people's happy mood in the prosperous countryside after the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Rooted in traditional folk dance styles, the work innovatively integrates typical real-life dynamic images into traditional elements, successfully portraying the amiable image of contemporary new farmers.

(2) Materials

As an early work utilizing Haiyang Yangko, *Cherry Red* takes its core “swing” (manifested in “swing steps”) as the basic choreographic element. The “swing step” is a full-body movement coordinated with upper body postures, generated by center-of-gravity shifts and rib stretching, with rich expressiveness^[5].

Inspired by cherries swaying on branches, the choreographer transformed this natural movement into human dynamics, blending it with the “swing” rhythm to present the cherry orchard atmosphere and the lively image of picking girls. The dance opens with actors' red cherry hats swinging, mimicking cherries in the breeze, conveying harvest joy and new rural vitality.

The “swing” rhythm is designed according to the dance's content and emotional changes—decomposed, exaggerated, re-edited and integrated into Haiyang

Yangko. Additionally, the traditional solo movement “Wind Swinging Willow” is reimagined as a group horizontal movement, enriching imagery and stage appeal.

(3) Use of props

Breaking the tradition of using fans and handkerchiefs (essential props for Han female folk dances), Cherry Red adopts bare-handed dancing. It borrows typical Yangko fan movements (pushing, inserting, pulling, etc.), adapts them into cherry-picking motions, and translates the extended characteristics of fan moves into limb movements—enhancing dynamism, elegance and emotional expression.

The refined “plucking the fan” move is incorporated into picking segments, with dancers’ hands moving freely to vividly depict the harvest scene. The dance integrates Haiyang Yangko’s lifting, wrapping, grinding and twisting rhythms into the “swing” rhythm, presenting diverse dynamic movements. By combining real-life dynamics with traditional styles, it portrays the new rural look and new farmer image, achieving a clever fusion of tradition and modernity.

3.1.2. *The woman on the other side of the mountain* (1999) – a group dance highlighting rural women’s resilience.

A women’s group dance choreographed by Zhang Yinsong (music: Zang Dongsheng, Liu Xigang), created in 1999 and performed by students from the Dance Department of the PLA Academy of Arts and members of the Jinan Military Region Vanguard Song and Dance Troupe.

(1) Theme

Drawing on Haiyang Yangko music, the work depicts the flexibility, steadfastness and tenacity of Shandong mountain women, as well as their diligence and pursuit of a better life. It extracts character dynamics from traditional folk Yangko, emphasizing stylistic unity and rich rhythmic changes of folk materials, presenting a simple, familiar and emotional local flavor.

(2) Materials

The dance incorporates over 10 rare steps in Han folk dance (stepping, circular steps, lateral steps, kicking steps, etc.), each with multiple variations (size, squatting, turning) and contrast changes in force (light/heavy, slow/

rapid), enhancing movement fluency and expressive space.

It integrates footsteps from traditional folk square Yangko characters: stepping (typical of doctors), chasing/falling/stomping (from Aunt Wang and Cloak Craftsman’s banter), as well as steps from Hua Gu, Ugly Woman, Huo Lang and Cui Hua. Focusing on mountain women’s life, three core steps (stepping, stomping, following) are used, with breath throughout. These steps carry cultural meanings—reflecting reverence for the earth, agricultural civilization’s “men farming and women weaving”, and Haiyang’s “men going to sea, women farming and weaving” reality^[6].

(3) Props

Adopting traditional women’s dance fans, the work uses diverse fan techniques (pushing, sending, wrapping, “8” shaped, waist twist fans, etc.) to externalize mountain women’s inner emotions. Fan movements (e.g., chest-wrapping circular steps, large flip fans with stepping, soft step sending fans) showcase their gentleness, boldness, calmness, humor and other characteristics.

Innovatively, the dance uses edgeless fans held solely in the right hand (without a left-hand handkerchief), differing from traditional folk props. Derived from folk traditions yet innovated, the tailored fans bring a clean, crisp feeling, making characters simpler and more approachable. Integrating fan characteristics of different folk roles, it expands the dynamic scale while retaining traditional flavor, achieving a fresh and beautiful expression.

3.2. Modern

3.2.1. Moon in the Mood

Choreographer: Yuan Yuan; Performer: Wang Xuerou (Department of Chinese Folk Dance, Beijing Dance Academy). Created for the 15th Beijing Dance Competition, this outstanding Haiyang Yangko work won the first prize in the professional youth group, triggered great social repercussions, and was later included in national folk dance teaching repertoires.

(1) Theme

An ethereal, abstract concept with diverse interpretations—yearning for hometown, nostalgia for the past, or romantic love, etc. The fan serves as a key emotional medium, depicting emotional tugs and inner

struggles leading to spiritual liberation. Haiyang Yangko's "circle" movements are a prominent artistic feature throughout.

(2) Materials

A fusion of Haiyang Yangko with modern/contemporary dance, depicting a Shandong woman's psychological growth from loneliness and sorrow to strength and resolve, highlighting her unique resilience. The choreographer focuses on "circle" expressions: Haiyang Yangko's core dynamic trajectories ("flat circle", "vertical circle", "8-figure circle")^[7], and classic fan moves (wrapped head fan, shade fan, etc.) supplemented by body twisting, winding and stretching, forming the dance's basic dynamic laws.

Dynamic rhythm is central—drawing on Haiyang Yangko's "lifting, wrapping, twisting" rhythms (similar to Red Coral)^[8], and leveraging the "waist twisting" feature shared by Haiyang and Jiaozhou Yangko to enhance expressive power.

(3) Use of props

The fan is the core prop, assisting in drawing "circles" throughout the dance^[9]. Dancers traverse the stage in circular arcs, with long skirts and fans fluttering; the fan rotates with body movements to form flat circles and vertical circles.

Haiyang Yangko's classic "wrapped head fan" and "8-figure circle" are featured prominently (the former runs through the first half). As an extension of the arm, the fan expands movement range, clarifies tracks, and maximizes body expression. Through kneading-twisting, detouring and stretching movements, combined with breath, it amplifies Haiyang Yangko's instant retraction, forms 8-shaped flow routes, and presents surging momentum—especially reflected in waist twisting and pulling.

3.2.2. Su Yue

Choreographers: Li Jiawen, Yuan Zhuma, Jie Lin; Performer: Zhejiang Conservatory of Music Dance School. An innovative Chinese folk dance rooted in Haiyang Yangko, with "fish" as the core image and "leap" as the creative focus, embodying national spirit and cultural inheritance.

(1) Theme

Adapted from traditional Haiyang Yangko, the

work uses modern dance language and stage techniques to present the dialogue and collision between tradition and modernity. Centered on the "backtracking and leap" of fish, it highlights traditional cultural roots and its contemporary regeneration. Taking "fish" as a metaphor for national spirit, it depicts fish struggling against the tide of the times—showing passion, tenacity, and courage—and conveys the deep affection of Chinese descendants and the indomitable national soul.

(2) Materials

With a compact structure, the dance skillfully integrates Haiyang Yangko characteristics. Dancers swing silk fans like fish tails, simulating waves and vividly depicting fish swimming in streams and rushing into torrents. The climax tests dancers' physical strength and skills, with fan movements enhancing the dance's difficulty and appeal, and body language conveying the spirit of treading waves and singing.

(3) Use of props

The silk fan is the core prop, inheriting traditional Haiyang Yangko's expressive function while gaining new symbolic meaning. Its swings simulate fish tail rhythms, vividly presenting fish swimming postures; combined with body language, it strengthens the "leap" image and symbolizes vitality and indomitable struggle—aligning with the dance's theme.

Inheriting Haiyang Yangko, the work integrates modern dance's freedom and strength. Through innovative, complex fan-waving techniques, it breaks through traditional Haiyang Yangko's limitations, enriches body expression and movement diversity, emphasizes the "fish" and "leap" themes, and injects new vitality into the traditional art form.

4. Findings

4.1. Traditional case studies

4.1.1. Cherry red (1985)

This solo piece reinterprets Yangko's swing rhythm as its central aesthetic. Props are removed, with dancers' bare-hand gestures mimicking cherry blossoms. Traditional fan actions such as pushing or wrapping are abstracted into arm swings symbolizing harvest imagery. By retaining the swing rhythm while inventing new imagery, the choreography embodies both authenticity and modern

innovation, yet remains anchored in folk culture.

4.1.2. The woman on the other side of the mountain (1999)

This group piece celebrates Shandong rural women's endurance. Choreographers preserved Yangko's stepping and stomping vocabulary to symbolize a deep bond with farmland. The use of a redesigned single-sided fan (without the traditional hanging scarf) represents a modernization of props, while still echoing traditional tools. The dance expresses a strong sense of place and gender identity, highlighting women's resilience in rural life.

4.2. Modern case studies

4.2.1. The Moon in the Mood

This work retains Haiyang Yangko's circular steps—such as “figure-eight” patterns and rotating arcs—but uses them in an abstract narrative. Instead of portraying folk characters, it conveys emotional states, particularly loneliness and longing, through the metaphor of the moon. Props and costumes are minimalist, emphasizing mood over festivity. The piece demonstrates how Yangko vocabulary can be adapted for psychological and symbolic storytelling.

4.2.2. Su Yue (2017)

Drawing on the metaphor of a fish struggling against currents, *Su Yue* employed Yangko twisting steps and long silk fans to simulate fish tails. The choreography abstracted Yangko gestures—folding, wrapping, circling—into representations of aquatic movement. The result was a vivid, symbolic narrative that translated folk language into a modern metaphor of resilience and rebirth, resonating with audiences both emotionally and visually.

5. Discussion

The comparative analysis of traditional and modern works reveals several insights:

5.1. Tradition as the root

In *Cherry Red* and *The Woman on the Other Side of the Mountain*, the emphasis lies in reinforcing

Haiyang Yangko's folk essence. Both works rely heavily on rhythmic stepping, stomping, and swinging, demonstrating continuity with heritage. Even when props were redesigned or imagery updated, the pieces clearly identify with the cultural life of rural Shandong.

5.2. Modern Reinterpretation as Expansion

By contrast, *The Moon in the Mood* and *Su Yue* represent a departure from literal folk imagery toward abstraction and symbolism. These modern works maintain Yangko movement vocabulary but expand thematic scope to psychological and metaphorical dimensions, allowing the dance to cross into contemporary aesthetics and global discourses.

5.3. Reimagining Boundaries

The juxtaposition of tradition and modernity illustrates how Haiyang Yangko negotiates its cultural boundaries. Traditional adaptations preserve locality and heritage, while modern reinterpretations broaden universality and artistic range^[10]. Together, they demonstrate that cultural sustainability lies not in freezing forms but in enabling transformation.

5.4. Factors of success

Across both traditional and modern works, successful adaptations share three traits:

- (1) Recognition of core movement vocabulary (swing, stomping, twisting).
- (2) Sensitivity to cultural symbolism (props, community identity, emotional metaphors).
- (3) Aesthetic strategies that resonate with audiences, whether through folk authenticity or modern abstraction.

6. Conclusion

Haiyang Yangko's transformation demonstrates that tradition and innovation are not opposites but partners in sustaining cultural heritage^[11]. The traditional cases highlight fidelity to rural life and cultural continuity, while the modern cases illustrate the possibilities of thematic abstraction and cross-disciplinary staging. Together, they reflect how reimagining boundaries allows Haiyang Yangko to remain relevant as both heritage and

artistic creation^[12].

By reinterpreting its choreographic vocabulary, adapting props and spatial designs, and expanding narratives, Haiyang Yangko has transitioned from community ritual to contemporary stage performance

without losing its cultural identity. This case underscores a universal lesson: the future of performing arts depends not on abandoning tradition, but on reinventing it for new generations and global audiences.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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