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From "Heaven-Earth-Human" Imagery to Stage Spatial Narrative: Translation of Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements in Stage Design

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Abstract. Against the background where the creative transformation of traditional culture has become a key topic in contemporary design, this paper takes the stage design scheme of the dance work *Agarwood·VI* as its research object. Combining the design conception and effect drawings, it analyzes how the "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery is translated into spatial forms. The study finds that through circular sky backdrops, rock masses, door opening interfaces, light-shadow paths and body movement arrangement, the scheme builds a spiritual space of "Heaven", an action field of "Earth" and a bodily narrative of "Human". This paper holds that the design transforms traditional cultural imagery into a stage spatial narrative structure, providing a case reference for the translation of traditional culture in contemporary stage design.

Keywords: "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery, stage spatial narrative, stage design, traditional culture, cultural translation

1. Introduction

The innovative application of fine traditional Chinese culture in modern design has become an important topic in art and design research. For contemporary design, traditional culture is not merely a historical resource or decorative material, but an important basis for constructing cultural identity, aesthetic spirit and visual systems. Especially in stage design, the transformation of traditional cultural elements takes on more comprehensive forms. Stage design is not a single presentation of patterns, colors or shapes, but a composite system formed by spatial structure, lighting arrangement, image media, material texture, costume form, body movement and the performer-audience relationship [1]. Therefore, discussing the application of traditional culture in stage design cannot stay at the level of selecting traditional cultural elements. Previous studies on the application of traditional cultural elements often focus on easily recognizable symbols. Such analyses help identify the visual sources of traditional culture, but over-reliance on element recognition tends to reduce traditional culture to formal resources that can be directly extracted, collaged and decorated, thus obscuring the way it enters the internal generation logic of modern design. In other words, what is

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truly worth exploring is how traditional cultural concepts are transformed into spatial structures, media languages and aesthetic experiences.

The stage design scheme of the dance work *Agarwood·VI* discussed in this paper provides a valuable case for analysis. The design takes "Heaven-Earth-Human" as its overall conception and presents it through modern stage visual language. This paper argues that the outstanding value of this dance work's stage design lies in transforming the "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery into a spatial narrative structure. Among them, "Heaven" constructs a spiritual space through circles, domes, light sources and vortices; "Earth" generates an action field through mountains and rocks, door openings, masses and paths; "Human" connects the relationship between Heaven and Earth through dancers' bodies, group formations and movement rhythms. As a result, traditional cultural elements are transformed from static symbols into dynamic stage experiences, forming a stage expression with Chinese aesthetic characteristics in the language of modern stage design. The stage effect drawings used in this paper are provided by the stage designer of this work, and relevant analysis mainly focuses on design conception, visual structure and spatial presentation.

2. Stage transformation of the "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery: from cultural concepts to spatial structure

In traditional Chinese thought, "Heaven-Earth-Human" is often understood within a holistic cosmic relationship. It concerns not only the natural order, but also human beings' existential position and way of action [2]. It can be said that "Heaven-Earth-Human" is a conceptual structure with holistic meaning in traditional Chinese culture, and a basic way of understanding world relations. In the analysis of this paper, "Heaven" mainly refers to cosmic order, spiritual height and transcendent power; "Earth" is mainly related to natural mountains and rivers, realistic foundation and bearing space; "Human" stands between Heaven and Earth, and participates in the generation of the world through action, feeling and ethical relations. When this imagery is placed in stage design, it shows strong potential for spatial transformation. The stage itself is an organized space-time structure. "Heaven" can be implemented as upper space, light source system, sky backdrop images and spiritual orientation; "Earth" can be implemented as stage landforms, installation masses, action routes and field environment; "Human" connects the upper spiritual space with the lower realistic field through the dancer's body. From this perspective, "Heaven-Earth-Human" is not an external theme of this set of stage designs, but its internal spatial logic, which dominates the visual expansion of the stage from top to bottom, from far to near, from virtual to real, and from environment to body.

This design scheme does not take concrete traditional images as its main approach, but adopts abstract structures processed by modern stage language, such as huge oval sky backdrops, vortex images, stone-textured masses, transparent luminous frames, atomized ground, stairs, slopes and light strips. These visual elements have a distinct modern sense while retaining the spiritual orientation of traditional culture. The circular sky backdrop easily evokes associations with the celestial vault, the universe and circulation; stone walls, door openings and stairs continue the spatial experience of being viewable, visitable and enterable in traditional landscape painting; the standing, walking and lifting of dancers in the huge space give concrete stage presentation to the traditional concept of human being between Heaven and Earth. Thus, traditional culture in this case becomes an internal mechanism for organizing stage space, guiding audience viewing and promoting body narrative.

This paper summarizes this design with imagery rather than symbols, precisely because "Heaven-Earth-Human" forms a generative aesthetic structure on the stage. Imagery includes not only visible images, but also emotions, directions and spatial relations [3]. In this stage design, "Heaven" forms a

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spiritual space beyond reality through huge circular structures, light sources, vortices and image movement; "Earth" forms a landscape field for characters to pass through and act in with the help of rock texture, door openings, masses and mist; "Human" endows space with meaning through body movement. It is in this process that the "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery is further transformed into spatial narrative. Through visual layers, spatial paths, light and shadow directions and body movements, the stage allows the audience to feel the aesthetic process from looking up to entering, from walking to arriving, and from individual to whole.

3. Visual narrative of "Heaven": circular sky backdrop, dome structure and spiritual order

In the design of "Heaven", the most striking visual element is the huge circular or oval structure. Suspended in the black stage space, they evoke associations with the eye of heaven, domes, cave heavens, vortices or entrances to the depths of the universe, constructing an upper space and spiritual dimension in an abstract way. Circles are visually inclusive, circular, complete and centripetal. When placed on the stage, they can quickly form a visual center, drawing the audience's gaze from ground movements upward and far away. Especially in a dark environment, the circular sky backdrop and the internal images form a strong contrast between light and dark, giving "Heaven" a deep, subtle and inexhaustible sense of space. As a result, the traditional cultural concepts of the operation of heavenly way, cyclic generation and spiritual transcendence are transformed into the visual order of modern stage design. Through form, scale and light-shadow relationship, they arouse the audience's perception of cosmic space and spiritual order.

In one of the pictures, a huge hand hangs down from the circular sky backdrop, with dancers gathered in groups below (Figure 1). The palm originally belongs to a part of the human body, but when it is extremely enlarged and extended from the upper space, it gains a sense of power beyond daily experience. It is precisely because its scale, position and appearance have changed that the palm here has broken away from the meaning of an ordinary body part, and is treated as a symbol of power from the upper space. It may mean call and shelter, or imply fate pressure or invisible spiritual call. The dancers below face upward together in a gathered posture, forming a visual relationship of mutual response between "upper power" and "human group" on the stage. The gathering, looking up and stretching of the dancers give the originally invisible spiritual order a perceptible stage form.

Figure 1. One of the stage effect drawings of Agarwood·VI: "Heaven" imagery space design (designer: Xue Jin)

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In another type of "Heaven" picture, vortices, stairs, progressively advancing lines and a central light source appear inside the circular space, turning the stage space from static images into dynamic paths (Figure 2). Vortices suggest circulation and generation, stairs point to ascent and arrival, and the central light source becomes the convergence point of vision and spirit. The "Heaven" here can be understood as a spiritual channel that can be watched and felt. Dancers stand below or in the center, echoing the light source above, creating a sense of movement on the stage that leads from the ground to heights, and from reality to spirit.

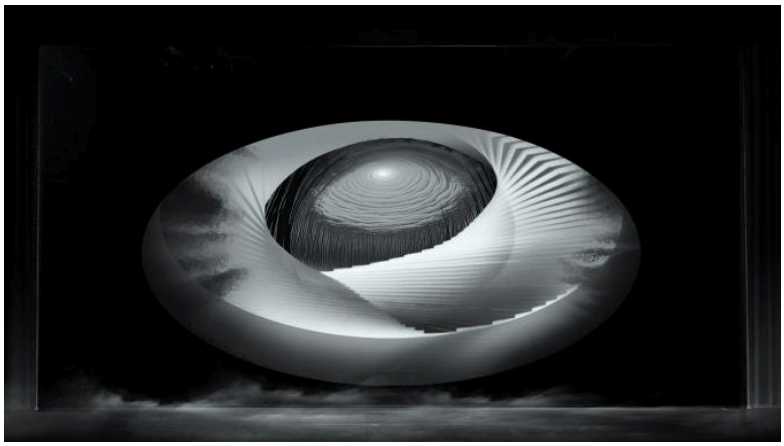

Figure 2. The second stage effect drawing of Agarwood·VI: circular sky backdrop and central light source (designer: Xue Jin)

It can be said that the design of "Heaven" establishes the spiritual height of the stage. It forms a clear visual direction, guiding the audience's gaze to gather upward, farward and inward. It stimulates the relationship between human beings and the universe. The dancer's body appears tiny under the huge sky backdrop, but it is precisely this scale difference that strengthens the theme of human beings finding their own position between Heaven and Earth. Thus, "Heaven" constitutes the first visual layer of the full text analysis: it opens the spiritual dimension of the stage from a high place, and lays the foundation for the field construction of "Earth" and the body action of "Human" later.

4. Field construction of "Earth": landscape imagery, door opening interface and action path

Compared with the ethereal and expansive nature of "Heaven", the part of "Earth" emphasizes massiveness, texture and actability more. The stone texture, mountain facades, door openings, giant walls, metal masses, low mist and ground light strips in the pictures together form a stage landform with a sense of weight, barrier and direction. Characters are placed in it, and their actions are guided and restricted by the spatial structure. Thus, "Earth" becomes the environmental structure where character actions unfold.

In one picture, a stone structure with an arched door opening appears on the left side of the stage, and a tall rock-textured facade is on the right side. Characters are placed between the two, forming visual hints of passing through, staying or spatial transformation (Figure 3). This scene well reflects the modern translation of traditional landscape imagery. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, "mountains" are not just natural objects, but also carry people's spiritual imagination, sightseeing experience and life sustenance [4]. In this stage design, mountains and rocks are transformed into installation structures that can enclose space, divide space and guide character actions. The door

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opening is both an entrance and exit, and a symbol of spatial transformation. When a character passes by the door opening, it means entering from one space to another, and also drives the change of narrative emotion. The rock texture provides the aesthetic source of traditional culture, while the door opening structure endows it with the action function in modern stage.

Figure 3. The third stage effect drawing of Agarwood·VI: arched door opening and rock facade (designer: Xue Jin)

In another picture, orange transparent frames on both sides form a symmetrical structure, with dancers spreading horizontally in the middle (Figure 4). This design not only has a sense of modern materials, but also can be associated with the interface consciousness of doors, watchtowers, screens and corridors in traditional spaces. In traditional Chinese architecture and garden spaces, doors and screens are not just physical separators, but also undertake the functions of guiding sight, organizing paths, creating transitions and forming a sense of ritual. Although the transparent frames on this stage do not replicate ancient architectural styles, they retain the spatial logic of interface transformation. Transparent materials and orange light endow it with the technological sense of modern stage design, while the symmetrical structure and entrance feeling strengthen the ritual order. This shows that the modern translation of traditional culture does not necessarily depend on the restoration of old forms; more importantly, it extracts the spatial relations therein.

Figure 4. The fourth stage effect drawing of Agarwood·VI: symmetrical structure formed by transparent frames (designer: Xue Jin)

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In another picture, a huge metallic mass appears on the left side, with scratches, mottling and refraction effects on the surface, and dancers holding fans form a flowing queue on the right side. This picture further expands the meaning of "Earth", making it not only evoke associations with natural landforms, but also carry the meaning of historical weight, civilization deposition and volume oppression. The scale of the giant mass is far larger than that of the dancers, forming a strong visual oppression. It can be seen as a mountain-like mass, and can also evoke associations with steles, walls or cultural relics. In contrast, the fans in the dancers' hands are light, unfolded and flowing, forming a contrast between hardness and softness, lightness and heaviness, movement and stillness with the heavy, square and static mass. The earth bears characters and also restricts them; space provides places for body movements and also creates resistance that the body must face. It is in this resistance that characters unfold their dance, endowing the stage landform with narrative meaning.

Figure 5. The fifth stage effect drawing of Agarwood·VI: metallic mass (designer: Xue Jin)

Low mist and light strips also participate in the spatial construction of "Earth". Mist blurs the ground boundaries, making the stage no longer a clear, hard plane, but with a flowing, deep and uncertain texture. Light strips mark directions in the black space, forming a sense of path and guidance. Mist endows "Earth" with a virtual layer, while masses and door openings constitute real support. The transition between virtual and real extends the stage landscape from physical space to emotional space and spiritual space. Therefore, the design of "Earth" does not only provide a stage background, but forms an enterable, passable and narratable stage structure through the combination of mountains and rocks, door openings, masses, mist and light strips.

5. Bodily narrative of "Human": dancer actions and meaning generation

If "Heaven" opens the spiritual dimension of the stage and "Earth" provides the realistic field for character actions, then "Human" is the key to connecting the two. Different from static visual arts, dance works always take the body as their most important expression medium. Stage space often gains more definite performance life through the entry, movement and stay of dancers [5]. In this design, characters continuously change the meaning of the stage space through body actions. The standing, walking, lifting, gathering, dispersing, gazing and turning of dancers present the visual relationship between "Heaven" and "Earth". From this perspective, the part of "Human" should be regarded as a kind of bodily narrative. It is through movements that dancers transform space into narrative and visual structure into emotional experience.

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In one picture, the effect drawing places two characters at the end of the stairs, with a huge oval structure behind them and multiple white lines surrounding the periphery. Although the characters are small in size, they are at the visual center of the whole picture. This scene clearly presents the positional relationship of human beings between Heaven and Earth: the stairs provide a path from the ground to the center, the oval structure forms a sense of enclosure similar to cosmic space, and the characters standing in between are like both arrivals and witnesses. It can be seen that in this stage design, the meaning of human beings does not depend on the size of their volume, but on their position in space. Human beings appear tiny in the grand structure of Heaven and Earth, but it is precisely through standing and gazing that the body becomes the focal point of spatial meaning.

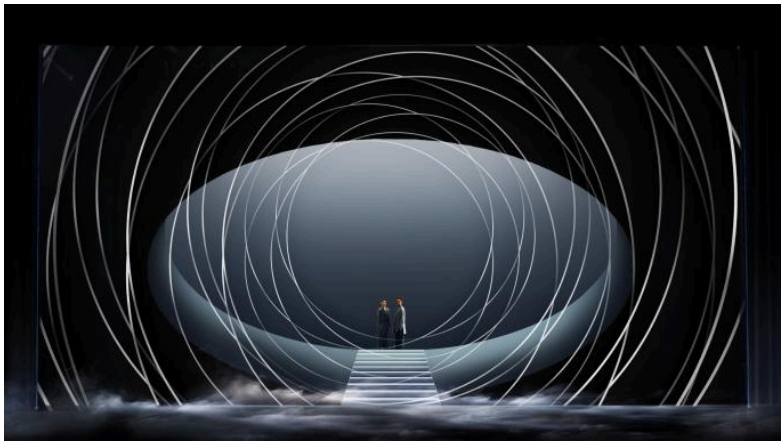

Figure 6. The sixth stage effect drawing of Agarwood·VI: end of the stairs (designer: Xue Jin)

In another picture, a dancer is lifted by a companion, with a huge black facade and a light path leading to the distance on the right side. Through the lifting movement, the black facade and the distant light path, this scene presents the process of the body gaining upward momentum from a restricted state. Lifting makes the body briefly leave the ground, forming an upward spiritual momentum; the black facade creates spatial oppression, and the light path draws the gaze to the distance. The three together form a bodily narrative from restriction to ascent, and then toward the distance. This scene shows that the spirituality of "Human" manifests in the relationship between body and space. Human beings act on the ground, yet try to transcend the limitations of the ground; human beings bear pressure in the dark, yet are led by light to the distance not yet reached.

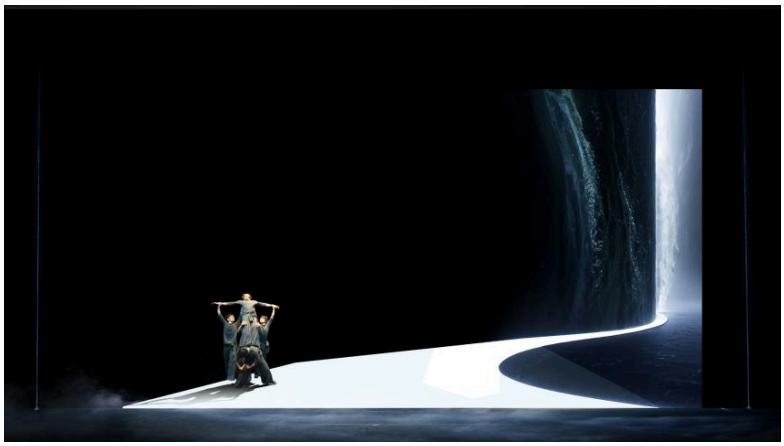

Figure 7. The seventh stage effect drawing of Agarwood·VI: distance and lifting (designer: Xue Jin)

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In addition to solo and duet relationships, group dance is also an important way for this stage design to express "Human". For example, under the giant hand (Figure 1), dancers gather in groups and face the power from above together; between the transparent frames, dancers spread horizontally, forming a symmetrical order with the installations on the left and right sides (Figure 4); in the image of the fan-holding group, the group movements and the opening and closing of props jointly generate a flowing rhythm (Figure 5). Group dance expands "Human" from individual body to community structure, presenting the relationship between people through formation, direction and rhythm. This community relationship further responds to the holistic thinking in the "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery: human beings do not exist in isolation, but find their own position in the interweaving of Heaven and Earth, groups and time.

6. Conclusion: design enlightenment from imagery translation to spatial narrative

Taking the stage design scheme of the dance work *Agarwood·VI* as the analysis object, this paper discusses the translation methods of traditional Chinese cultural elements in contemporary stage design around its "Heaven-Earth-Human" visual conception. Through analysis, it can be seen that this design does not treat traditional culture as surface decoration, but integrates it into the generation logic of stage space. Specifically, at the level of "Heaven", a visual space with cosmic sense and spiritual transcendence is constructed by means of circles, domes, light sources and vortices; at the level of "Earth", a stage field that can be passed through, stayed in and bear character actions is formed through mountains and rocks, door openings, stairs, masses and mist; at the level of "Human", the space of Heaven and Earth gains bodily narrative and emotional direction through standing, walking, lifting, group dance and gazing. As a result, "Heaven-Earth-Human" is no longer just a conceptual expression in traditional culture, but has been transformed into the organization mode and narrative structure of stage space.

The important enlightenment of this case is that the innovative application of traditional culture in contemporary stage design cannot stay at symbol reproduction and visual collage. Truly creative transformation means allowing traditional concepts to enter the design generation process and be transformed into spatial order, media language and emotional mechanism. The stage design of *Agarwood·VI* reconstructs the "Heaven-Earth-Human" imagery with modern stage technology and abstract visual forms, allowing circular images, stone masses, door opening interfaces, lighting mist and dancers' bodies to participate in spatial narrative together, thus bringing traditional cultural spirit into contemporary viewing experience.

Therefore, the innovative significance of this design lies in the spatial translation of traditional cultural imagery. It transforms "Heaven-Earth-Human" from cultural concepts into concrete stage experiences, and also suggests that contemporary stage design should shift from scattered symbol collage to clear extraction of cultural concepts, from simple retro to the construction of modern design language, from surface recognition to the generation of new aesthetic experiences. Only in this process can traditional culture truly transform from historical resources into the internal driving force of contemporary artistic creation.

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