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Research on the Method of Physical Actions and Philosophical Thought in Manchu Shamanic Dance

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Abstract. Taking Stanislavski's "Method of Physical Actions" (MPA) as the theoretical lens, this study explores the body practice and consciousness transformation mechanism of Manchu shamanic sacrificial dance. Through literature analysis, field investigation of the tiger-spirit ritual (tiao hu shen) in Qingyuan, Liaoning, and theoretical interpretation, the study finds that the core of shamanic dance is not the outward movements, but the inner energy projection before action, namely the impulse. The ritual presents a progressive structure of "inviting the spirit, possession, sending off the spirit", and its rhythm is jointly governed by the invocation words, drumbeats and waist bells; the shaman's step range, movement rate and breathing accordingly shift from the everyday to the non-everyday, and when the time lag between the inner impulse and the outer reaction disappears, the body becomes a channel for the manifestation of spirit power. This process fits closely with mpa's logic of "knowledge is a doing" and of suspending rational thinking through body action. The conclusion holds that Manchu shamanic dance is a living body philosophy, and that mpa provides an operable methodological path, turning shamanic body experience from the "mysterious" into the "knowable" and sublimating "intuition" into "knowledge"; it not only gives endangered intangible cultural heritage a new dimension of interpretation, but also opens new possibilities for the cross-cultural dialogue between ancient ritual practice and contemporary body training and performance methods, and has important academic value and practical significance.

Keywords: Manchu shamanic dance, Method of Physical Actions (MPA), impulse, the training of will

1. Introduction

The problem consciousness of this study comes from the cultural field where the researcher has long been situated. Shenyang in Liaoning was formerly called "Shengjing"; it was the birthplace of the Qing Dynasty and the core field where Manchu culture was nurtured and passed down. Nurhaci

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once set up the "Tangzi"[1] here to sacrifice to Heaven, bringing shamanic rituals into the state ritual system; the Tangzi site of the Shenyang Imperial Palace, the remains of family sacrifices, the oral text of *Nishan Shaman*, and the drum-dance traditions still continued by some families together form a relatively completely preserved system of Manchu shamanic intangible cultural heritage within China [1].

Existing research has accumulated a good deal on the historical context and ritual structure of Manchu shamanic dance, but it mostly concentrates on external descriptions at the levels of symbols, rituals and cultural symbolism [2], and says little about the operating mechanism of its "inner state". MPA happens to provide a new analytical approach for understanding how the shamanic body "becomes a channel". On this basis, this study re-examines the body experience, action logic and spiritual transformation of Manchu shamanic dance, and asks: can this ancient practice dialogue with contemporary body training and performance methods? And how can it be restarted in the double context of globalization and cultural revival?

2. Manchu sacrificial belief and totems: the interweaving of body, soul and cosmology

2.1. Belief and the "soul"

The Manchus originated from the Jurchens and belong to the Tungusic branch of the Altaic language family; their belief is rooted in the fishing and hunting life among the mountains, forests and rivers of Northeast Asia. As the core religious form, shamanic belief can be traced back to the northern rock paintings and oral narratives of the late Neolithic age; for thousands of years it sometimes hid among the folk and sometimes leapt to state ritual, and it has been continuously passed down through family sacrifices, wild sacrifices and healing rituals, internalized as the way of existence by which Manchu people perceive the world, understand life and death, and construct identity [1].

Its core is not abstract doctrine, but the flow and transformation of the "soul". The Manchus believe that all things have spirits; the human soul can leave the body and wander ("soul release"), and can also be frightened away by evil spirits, and must be called back by the shaman with dance, drum sounds and invocation words [3]. The shaman is the spiritual mediator who masters this skill: his spirit robe, crow-and-magpie crown, bronze bells and spirit drum are not decorations but functional carriers of spiritual power; his birth is often accompanied by "spirit-chosen" experiences such as dream omens, serious illness and visions, yet he must still complete the master-disciple ritual and oral training, embodying the double legitimacy of "heaven's mandate" and "human succession". His dance is not performance but an action path leading to the spirit world; his drum is not a musical instrument but a rhythm engine guiding the soul through the three realms of heaven, earth and the underworld.

2.2. Totem worship

Ancestor worship centers on the spirit tablets, covering direct ancestors and deified heroes (such as the war god "Cuohazhanye"), and stresses "bloodline is the sacred lineage". Nature worship holds "unity of heaven and man", venerating the gods of heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, sun and

[1] Tangzi, in Manchu "tangse", was the place of imperial Manchu shamanic sacrifice in the Qing Dynasty, combining the functions of sacrificing to Heaven, to spirits and to ancestors. After the Qing entered the pass, another Tangzi was set up in Beijing, raising the shamanic rituals that originally belonged to the clan level to state ritual.

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moon, wind and thunder, and of fire, water, trees and grain; the "spirit pole" in the center of the courtyard has a tin bucket on top holding grain for crows and magpies to peck, symbolizing the bird spirit as the messenger to heaven [1]. Animal worship regards the eagle, tiger, bear, deer and python as incarnations of spirits, linked with clan origin myths; in rituals the shaman imitates their movements, wears their furs and sings their spirit songs, completing the three-stage transformation of "imitating the beast, possession, reaching the spirits" [3].

3. Tiao dashen and the shaman

3.1. Tiao dashen in the dance ritual

"Tiao dashen" is an ancient folk sacrificial dance of the Manchus. Since the Qing Dynasty, ancestor sacrifice and spirit sacrifice have been equally important; it is held monthly or seasonally in Northeast China, aiming to drive away evil, pray for blessings and seek protection. On the day of sacrifice, the shaman dances while reciting invocation words accompanied by the sounds of ritual instruments, and the speed of the invocation words directly governs the dance rhythm; on the next day he sacrifices to Heaven and presents vows, dancing with bronze bells tied to his waist, finishing in three days [1].

3.2. The identity and functions of the shaman

"Shaman" comes from the Jurchen and Tungusic languages, meaning "one who knows the will of the spirits" or "the wise one"; he is believed to be able to reach the spirits, divine, control nature, and also has practical functions such as diagnosis and healing. In an age when natural forces could not be explained by common sense, the shaman priests passed down from generation to generation in the clan naturally became the leaders of interaction with the spirit world. The deities he reaches include the "red-faced Cuohazhanye" who rides a fire-dragon colt and commands the gods of Batulu, and seven clan shaman ancestors who "attained the Way and became gods", the seven generations of "taiye", who are in fact clan ancestor gods [1].

3.3. The state of shamanic "possession"

This study recorded on site the relatively completely preserved tiger-spirit ritual in Qingyuan Manchu Autonomous County, Liaoning, which is a representative of the "animal spirit possession" type of sacrifice. The ritual is performed by the cooperation of the "great shaman" and the "second shaman"[2]: the great shaman recites Manchu invocation words, beats the drum to control the scene and leads the spirits to descend; the second shaman is the carrier of possession. At first the second shaman sits quietly, responding to the drumbeats only with slight tremors and breathing; as the invocation words quicken and the drum grows fiercer, involuntary shaking appears in his body. When the tiger spirit descends, the second shaman suddenly rises, shaking his head like roaring, leaping and pouncing on the ground like stalking, his torso rising and falling like prowling; the invocation words stop abruptly, the drum reaches its climax, and the whole audience holds its breath. This is not performative imitation, but the embodied manifestation of the spirit through the body

[2] The "great shaman" is the presiding shaman, responsible for reciting invocation words, beating the drum, controlling the scene and leading the spirits; the "second shaman", also called "zaili" or the singing assistant, serves as the body carrier for the spirits' descent in possession-type rituals. The two cooperate in division of labor, and neither can be missing.

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channel; the strength and direction of the movements are all governed by the "will of the spirits" rather than individual will. When "sending off the spirit", the second shaman's whole body becomes stiff and his breathing weak, nearly feigning death, and the drum stops abruptly; only after the great shaman slowly wakes him with the spirit-calming invocation words does he return from the "spirit body" to "human form". As for ritual structure, this process from separation, transformation to return can be seen as a concrete performance of the "liminal" stage of ritual described by Turner.

The shaman strives for the state of "trance" or "selfless spirit". After inviting and sending off the spirits, what remains in his mind is not movements, but a burning, trance-like "inner state". This state is just like a glass cup burning inside: the cup is the solid program, which contains and guides the flame but is not the flame; the flame is the inner action, flickering and rising and falling with the wind, illuminating the program, and it is what the audience really sees. What exactly is this state that can only be sensed? An answer may be found through the Method of Physical Actions of Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999). Grotowski shook the European and American avant-garde theater circles with the "Poor Theatre" in the 1960s and is regarded as one of the four great theater masters of the twentieth century [4]. As for the core of MPA, what can be seen and touched is the shaman's performance form, from which one must decompose and purify, seeking the root of the force and the cause of the movement; as for what is "invisible and untouchable" in the body, some scholars attribute it to spiritual culture or style, but this study holds that it may be exactly the key factor explored by MPA: the will.

4. Knowing, feeling, willing and the "three bodies"

Stanislavski (1863-1938) proposed in *An Actor's Work* the trinity of inner driving forces of knowledge, emotion and will: knowledge comes from studying the script and analyzing the character, letting the actor master the supreme task and the through action; emotion comes from the character's inner feelings and the tempo/rhythm of the outer movements [5]. As for the will, Stanislavski held that there is no direct means to influence it, at most to arouse it indirectly through emotion; in *My Life in Art* he only vaguely pointed out that the will is the way to "truthfulness", and called that superb performing state "creative emotion", which is like a gift from heaven and cannot be imposed by one's own will [6]. What he studied all his life was exactly how to use the will to create the powerful state from which inspiration surges.

The "animal body" is an idea Grotowski cherished: "Do not forget: our body is an animal." [7] Paul MacLean's triune brain theory can be the supporting evidence: humans possess the reptilian brain, the paleomammalian brain and the neomammalian brain, which differ greatly in evolution and function [8]; James Papez classified brain functions into the stream of movement, the stream of emotion and the stream of thought. Knowledge corresponds to the stream of thought and emotion to the stream of emotion; then, does the will have an inner connection with the "stream of movement"? If the will is assigned to the stream of thought, logical rational thinking cannot touch the depths of the soul, let alone lead the actor into the best state; if it is assigned to the stream of emotion, then as Stanislavski said, emotion is not controlled by the will and cannot arouse creative emotion at any time [8].

In other words, although the will cannot be completely equated with the stream of movement, it can find the answer it seeks through body action: entering the best performing state. This is exactly the key why Grotowski summed up Stanislavski's experience and devoted his later years to the research of the Method of Physical Actions (MPA): the body, the action, and the will in "knowing, feeling and willing". As *Three Sighs on MPA: A Tribute to the Master Stanislavski* argues, although the two both studied MPA, there are two major differences. First, Grotowski broke the framework of

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Stanislavski that was limited to character roles; after *The Constant Prince*, actors dug body actions out of memory from their own important personal experiences and constructed them into performance programs, and then the director combined everyone's programs with theater elements into a performance text. Second, the will that Stanislavski touched in his later years still could not leave the reasonable constraints of knowledge and emotion, while Grotowski's MPA broke the boundary between rationality and emotion and locked onto the impulse before body action, that is, pushing the will toward the impulse in body training [9].

5. The connection between body and inner mind: impulse

What is the impulse? Grotowski pointed out: "It is the inner pulse, the beating from inside. Before a small body action there must be an impulse. It is very hard to grasp, because the impulse is a reaction that starts inside the body, and it can only be seen when a small action has already formed. You cannot say it belongs only to the domain of the flesh. An impulse is a simple beating of energy, a simple projection." [8]

Take shamanic sacrificial dance as an example: during the ritual the offerings are constantly changed to show respect to the spirits; instruments such as drum, knife and fence board join in, together with the sound of waist bells driven by the shaman's steps, entering the initial stage of inviting the spirits. At this time the shaman mainly communicates with words, with small and light steps, soft posture, and instruments that are gentle and clearly rhythmic. As the rhythm of the invocation words quickens and the voice grows smaller, the step range and upper-body movement rate enlarge, and the instruments turn urgent and loud, entering the second stage: the shaman becomes unconscious, semi-faints or keeps dancing wildly, lasting from a few minutes to dozens of minutes. In the last stage, the shaman faints or holds his breath, the instruments stop abruptly, and the crowd kowtows to send off the spirits; after a moment the shaman wakes and continues to lead the ritual. This is the continuation of the shaman's inner energy projection: the impulse. His body is driven by breathing amid the instruments and rhythm, running through the whole body; rhythmic inner breathing brings the person into the best state and forms the projection of body energy. The shaman masters the inner "energy" through countless trainings, and expresses "life force" through body action; this projection coincides with dance rhythm, both being a wish force from inside out.

In Grotowski's horizon, the impulse is both simple (a projection of energy) and complex (it cannot be attributed only to the flesh). Its simplicity lies in that once one enters the non-everyday performing state, the projection of force comes easily; but entering this state is by no means a matter of one morning or one evening, and it requires long-term "training of the will". Its complexity lies in that Grotowski's impulse is not carried out in the real everyday life situations Stanislavski spoke of; on the contrary, "Grotowski explores body action in the basic stream of life, not in social everyday life situations, and the impulse in this stream of life is the most important" [8].

The Manchu shaman is situated in a social group, yet he can, through the sounds of instruments and waist bells, transform from everyday behavior into non-everyday action. "When there is no longer any time lag between the inner impulse and the outer reaction, reaching the state where the impulse is already the outer reaction, the impulse and the action merge: the body disappears, burns out, and the audience only sees a series of visible impulses." [8] This is exactly: the impulse is the action, and the action is the performing state.

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6. Just do it: the shaman's "mad" body

The shaman dances in "madness", and this madness comes from spirit possession and soul release. When inviting the spirits, the shaman shows a physiological state of trance and stupor, which gives rise to the obsessive "swaying" of "indulging without self, spirit energy running through"; it is especially obvious in wild sacrifices: after the shaman invites an ancestral hero god and falls into trance, his body sways now fast now slow, now heavy now light, and must be supported by the zaili[3]; after praying he spins dozens of circles clockwise and counterclockwise, the drumbeats turn urgent, the shaman falls into spasmodic trembling, sometimes foaming at the mouth, and suddenly dashes in one direction; at the end of the ritual, drumming and spinning again, he dances to send off the spirits. This is exactly the core link of shamanic dance, the communication between man and spirits; it is a spiritual practice, embodying the Manchu people's reverent submission and hope toward the spirits.

According to the interview, the performer of the ritual said: "Every time I enter the state, what I perform is no longer myself. I do not consider in advance whether the movements are right or wrong. To dance well you must grasp three points: be skilled in the ritual, have comprehension, and put in effort to practice more. I learned the unique skills of the old artists, then strung their characteristics, styles and rhythms into one line and merged them together." From this it can be seen: "no longer being oneself" and "possession" are exactly the "awareness", "presence" and best performing state in vertical ascent and descent [10]; "being skilled in the ritual" and "putting in effort" are what Grotowski called "knowledge is a doing" [8]; "stringing into one line" is the tension between "organicity" and "awareness"; "not considering the movements" is disarming knowledge with body action, doing subtraction, stripping and suspending normalized rational thinking, and advancing the "training of the will" with the stream of action. As Grotowski said, one must walk back, find the bodies of ever more distant ancestors, "like returning from exile", and touch the things from the beginning of creation [8, 11]. The shaman's body is exactly a living fossil: it is different from the body trained by the academy, yet it is close to the ancient primitive body.

7. Conclusion

The "soul" of Manchu shamanic sacrifice is not in the ritual forms or totem symbols, but in the impulse carried by the shaman's body, an energy flow born from within and running through knowing, feeling and willing, that is, the "beating before action" pointed to by MPA: the body's direct response to the origin of existence before rationality intervenes. The spinning and swaying of "tiao dashen" is not out of control, but organic action condensed by the "training of the will"; its driving force comes from awe of and resonance with ancestors, nature and spirits.

On this basis, this study holds that Manchu shamanic dance is not only endangered intangible cultural heritage, but also a living body philosophy, using the body as the medium to continuously carry out vertical dialogue between humans and spirits, nature and ancestors. What MPA provides is exactly an operable, analyzable and transmittable methodological path, letting the research go beyond external description into the inner structure of shamanic body experience, turning the "mysterious" into the "knowable" and sublimating "intuition" into "knowledge".

[3] The zaili is the assistant in Manchu shamanic rituals; when the shaman falls into trance and loses self-control, the zaili is responsible for supporting and protecting him, and helps pass ritual instruments and offerings.

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