

## Analysis of the Corporeality and Existence of Social Dance

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### ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the profound impact of social dance on individuals and society as a whole from the perspective of embodied phenomenology. By examining how individuals express themselves and experience social relationships through dance, it reveals the critical role of the body in social dance and analyzes how dance serves as a bridge for interaction between individuals and society. Simultaneously, it investigates the limitations and potentials of social dance at the phenomenological level, exploring how this bodily practice may constrain or expand individuals' perceptions and experiences of social existence under specific conditions. Through this comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to offer a novel perspective on social dance research and establish a foundation for further understanding the complex relationship between the body and society.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study provides an integrated analysis of the existing literature by incorporating phenomenological and sociological perspectives into social dance, exploring the cultural significance and bodily expression within the social body. As one of the few studies of its kind, it primarily investigates the practical significance of non-professional dance in society and its social contributions.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of social dance may not be widely familiar to the general public, but it is undeniable that mass dance activities occur daily around us, intricately connected to our lives and increasingly influencing our daily experiences as times evolve. Whether it is the fitness dance performed by elderly individuals in the park each morning, the campus dances performed by children for physical fitness, emotional enrichment, and artistic cultivation, the energetic and rhythmic square dances of elderly women after sunset, or the various social dance competitions organized by cultural departments to enrich people's spiritual lives, these forms of dance are not only modes of collective entertainment but also bodily expressions of social existence. This paper, from the perspective of embodied phenomenology, explores how social dance, as a form of bodily practice, generates meaning within society and how the body becomes a medium for

self-expression, identity formation, and social interaction in this process. Through an in-depth analysis of social dance, the paper aims to reveal how individuals construct and understand their existence within society through dance and to explore the profound impact and limitations of social dance on both individuals and groups. This study not only offers a new theoretical perspective on understanding social dance but also provides strong support for further exploration of the relationship between the body and social existence.

### 1.1. Background

In modern society, the forms and functions of social dance are undergoing significant changes. From traditional group dances to contemporary street dance and social dances, the expressions and styles of social dance are continually evolving. These changes reflect not only the diversity of social culture but also the impact of different social environments on the art of dance (Wang, 2021). The earliest definition of social dance was proposed by the Laban Centre, a comprehensive dance school in the UK, in the 1976 publication *Laban Centre Curriculum*. Rudolf Laban, a dance theorist and social activist, played a key role in this definition. In China, the concept of social dance was first introduced 28 years ago during the first National Mass Dance Creation Seminar held in 1987, where Chinese dancers innovatively used the term "social dance" to encompass various forms of mass dance (Ju, 2019).

From the perspective of embodied phenomenology, social dance is not only an external manifestation of the body but also a way for individuals to interact with their social environment through the body (Mooney, 2022). The body plays a crucial role in dance; it is not only the carrier of dance movements but also a medium through which individuals express, perceive, and identify themselves within the social sphere. In contemporary society, dance is not only a form of entertainment and art but also an integral part of social culture, permeating various aspects of daily life. Social dance, as a form widely present among mass groups, reflects the diversity of social culture and reveals the complex process of individual interaction with society through the body (Yi, 2021). Against the backdrop of accelerated urbanization, new forms and settings for social dance have emerged, with urban community centers and public spaces becoming important stages for social dance. In rural areas, traditional folk dances continue to retain unique regional and cultural characteristics. In modern society, social dance, as a form of cultural expression and social interaction, is undergoing rapid transformation. These changes bring new challenges and opportunities, making the roles and functions of social dance in different social environments increasingly complex. However, existing research often fails to deeply explore how social dance redefines its social functions and impacts on communities and individuals in the contexts of globalization and urbanization.

### 1.2. Problem Statement

The forms and functions of social dance have undergone significant changes in the context of globalization. These changes include the modernization of traditional dance forms, the rise of urban social dances, and the blending of cross-cultural dance styles. The impact of urbanization on social dance is particularly pronounced, with modern dance forms such as square dancing and street dance increasingly replacing traditional local dances and becoming the dominant expressions in public spaces (Wang, 2011). However, this shift has not only altered the forms of dance but also affected its social

functions. For instance, while the popularity of square dancing has strengthened community cohesion, it has also introduced new issues such as noise pollution and competition for space. Conversely, traditional dances in rural areas face challenges such as participant attrition and insufficient resources.

Thus, balancing the differences between urban and rural dance forms and promoting the equitable development of social dance is an important research topic. Current studies often focus on the experience and expression of the body in dance, particularly how bodily experiences contribute to the artistic expression of dance. However, research on the application of embodied phenomenology in social dance is relatively scarce. Existing embodied phenomenology studies tend to emphasize modern or classical dance forms, overlooking the bodily experiences and cultural meanings within the crucial field of social dance. Therefore, investigating how to apply embodied phenomenology to the modernization of social dance in China, to gain a deeper understanding of the bodily experiences and cultural expressions in dance practice, is a serious and worthwhile issue to consider.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This study uses qualitative research methods, relying on literature review, case analysis, text analysis, and observation to explore the changes and impacts of social dance in China within the context of modernization. In terms of literature review, the study primarily relies on a systematic review of relevant academic literature both domestically and internationally. This literature includes research articles and books on the history, theory, and modernization process of Chinese social dance. Through comprehensive analysis of these materials, the study aims to describe the evolution of social dance in China and identify its roles and challenges in modern society. Case analysis is one of the core methods used in this study. By selecting several representative social dance projects and practices, such as modern dance performances, community dance activities, and related cultural festivals, this study examines the forms, content, and relationship of these cases with social changes. The selection of cases is based on their specific impact on the evolution of social dance, and in-depth analysis is conducted using actual observational data. Text analysis is used to study core texts related to dance works, including choreography, performance, and audience feedback. This method helps reveal how dance texts reflect and influence social and cultural perceptions, and analyzes changes in the context of modernization. Observation, as a supplementary method, involves both participant and non-participant observation to collect data on the actual performance and audience reactions in social dance practices. These observational data provide firsthand field information, making the understanding of dance phenomena more comprehensive and specific. Additionally, the study includes a specific case analysis of Jiamusi fitness dance from Northeast China. Jiamusi fitness dance is a systematic, non-professional square dance created in 2008 that has spread to major cities across China. This example serves as a detailed content analysis of the social aspects of the body in dance.

## **3. Result**

This study provides an integrated analysis of the existing literature by incorporating phenomenological and sociological perspectives into social dance, exploring the cultural significance and bodily expression within the social body. As one of the few studies of its kind, it primarily investigates the practical significance of non-professional dance in

society and its social contributions. Through this analysis, the research presents a key insight: how such bodily practices can restrict or expand individuals' perceptions and experiences of social presence under specific conditions. This finding offers a new perspective on understanding the complex relationship between dance and society.

### 3.1. Sociality and Environmental Factors of Social Dance

Dance is not only an art form for personal expression but also a significant medium for social cultural interaction and identity formation. In China, particularly within community culture and square dance culture, dance exhibits its profound social nature. These cultural phenomena not only reflect social structures and cultural values but also play an important role in the dynamic social environment.

#### 3.1.1. Social Class in Dance

Participants in social dance activities come from all social strata; social dance is not restricted by status or region. Dance activities unfold as cultural expressions created by various social relationships. Additionally, social dance activities encompass all aspects of social life and serve as a direct representation of it. The content and form of these activities possess social characteristics (Xue, 2023). For example, the extensive use of folk dance materials, various public dance competitions and performances, and traditional regional customs all represent significant elements of social dance activities. Moreover, social dance addresses social issues, activities, societal perceptions, and values, showcasing rich social and cultural diversity through its various forms. The venues for social dance also possess social characteristics. Unlike professional dance, social dance is not confined to dance studios or stages; it can occur in diverse locations ranging from rural paths to public squares and stages. Secondly, social dance activities aim to meet the needs of various social classes as consciously motivated and purposeful actions. Whether for self-entertainment, social interaction, or cultural transmission, people can always find specific venues and suitable dance activities to gain the benefits they seek. Participants in social dance come from all social classes and are engaged in complex social relationships. This includes not only professional dancers but also ordinary individuals. When professional dancers participate in recreational choreography and performances, they also contribute to social dance. Participants in social dance have specific purposes and personal needs, engaging in various forms of social activities to fulfill their psychological and physiological needs (Yu, 2001).

These needs may vary based on social class. For example, individuals from higher social classes, with abundant wealth and higher cultural standards, are inclined towards ballroom dance to coordinate social relationships and expand their social circles. In contrast, those from lower social strata, with lower cultural standards, often have a strong affinity for folk dance. For them, preserving traditional art and culture is important, and folk cultural dance better satisfies their physiological needs. Social dance, therefore, partially fulfills people's life demands across different social classes, offering a way to find balance and relaxation amidst stressful situations, thus adjusting their life rhythm and improving their quality of life. Furthermore, different social environments and pressures have led to various forms of social dance, which reflect participants' understanding of social issues and their perceptions of society (Li & Zhao, 2023). As times change, social dance exists as a cultural phenomenon specific to different periods, reflecting corresponding cultural phenomena of those times.

### 3.1.2. Dance Forms in Social Environments

Social environments, including political, economic, and social changes, significantly influence the styles, types, and aesthetic characteristics of social dance. China, being a multi-ethnic country with extensive and diverse territory, has unique social features in different regions, which impact the development and characteristics of local social dances. The rapid development of social dance in various regions is driven by these diverse social environments (Gao, 2022). As social dance evolves, it diversifies into several types based on regional factors, generally categorized into three main types.

Rural dance refers to social dances that predominantly occur in China's rural areas and remote regions of cities. In these areas, characterized by sparse population and lack of specific dance communities, people often use dance as a means to relax due to economic disparities. Local residents, connected by blood ties and neighborhood relationships, enjoy self-entertainment dances. Rich rural folk dances take place in fields and farms, often referred to as "square folk dances" (Figure 1). Regardless of the development status of the village, these folk dances usually happen during traditional festivals or farming periods. In rural areas, there is no professional stage or specialized music equipment, so most farmers create songs based on their life experiences and local stories, providing their own accompaniment through humming. The more isolated the rural area, the more stable its dance style, reflecting the unique folk charm of rural dance as a core element of social dance.

Figure 1: Villagers performing dance at the village square



Source: Zhao (2023)

In ethnically diverse regions of China, the folk dances are enriched by the country's 56 different ethnic groups, each with their unique regional and cultural characteristics. These groups possess distinct artistic knowledge, lifestyle habits, folk customs, and ceremonial practices, contributing significantly to the richness of social dance content and its development in China. Their understanding of dance is deeply rooted in their historical backgrounds, living conditions, spiritual outlooks, and aesthetic tastes. In China, ethnic groups are often organized into autonomous regions, known as "autonomous prefectures" (Lin, 2023), which are distinct from other provinces and cities and generally have a strong artistic atmosphere and relatively simple, rustic social environments. During their ethnic festivals, these groups have unique dance styles to celebrate. For example, the Uygur people, primarily residing in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (Figure 2), benefit from their advantageous geographical environment and relatively better living conditions compared to other remote regions.

Their abundant food varieties and favorable economic conditions contribute to vibrant entertainment activities, making dance an essential part of their lives. Uygur people are known for their singing and dancing skills, and their social dance styles have become representative of their ethnic identity. Their dance movements often reflect aspects of their daily lives and local stories. During festivals, they perform in distinctive costumes, with performances typically involving male and female partners cooperating in a community or familial setting, without a specific venue. Like the Uygur, many other ethnic groups also showcase their distinctive cultural traits. With societal development and improving economic conditions, the unique features of these ethnicities have become widely recognized, marking one of the most notable characteristics of Chinese society and a significant module in dance art.

Urban dance occurs in cities where economic, political, and cultural development is advanced, characterized by fast-paced production and lifestyle. In urban environments, residents often face work pressures, leading to social dance activities predominantly involving middle-aged and older individuals in public spaces. Residents usually select public squares or community gardens as venues for their dances. Due to the superior economic conditions and rapid development of cities, the infrastructure for urban dance is typically better than in other areas, and the swift dissemination of information ensures that various regional art forms influence urban culture (Gou & Chen, 2003). Urban dance creates platforms for people to gather, interact, and share experiences through public or semi-public spaces such as streets, squares, and clubs. This social function helps build and strengthen community relationships, particularly in rapidly developing cities, providing opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures to understand and communicate with each other. Urban dance is often associated with young people and subcultural groups, and dances like square dancing and street dance serve not only as forms of artistic expression but also as important means of expressing personal identity and group affiliation.

Figure 2: Uighur people celebrating the Korban Festival



Source: Zhang (2022)

### 3. 2. Social Interaction and Cultural Expression of the Body

In sociology and phenomenology, the body is not only the physical foundation of individual existence but also a crucial medium for social interaction. Phenomenology, based on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) theory, emphasizes the body's central role in

perceiving the world and society. Social dance, as a form of collective dance, not only promotes physical health but also enhances social interaction and cultural exchange. The widespread popularity of social dance reflects how community members establish social relationships and a sense of identity through shared physical activities (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Participants experience a sense of bodily communion and rhythm through synchronized exercise in public spaces. This synchronized physical activity fosters mutual understanding and social cohesion among individuals. From Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological perspective, this interaction occurs not only on the level of the body but also has profound emotional and identity implications. This paper uses the Jiamusi fitness dance as a case study to analyze the social interaction of the dance body and its cultural expression under the influence of the social context.

### 3.2.1. Body Interaction and Social Structure

Merleau-Ponty (1962) proposed that the body is not only the foundation of individual existence but also profoundly influences social relationships through its actions and expressions. The body is the basis of perception and action and is central to the connection between individuals and the social world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 162). In collective social dances, bodily movements and rhythms are not merely reflections of individual bodies but are key factors in community interaction. Through shared bodily experiences, participants find their place and social identity within social interactions. The body serves as the basis for perception and action and is central to connecting individuals with the social world.

In social dance, bodily movements and postures are not only expressions of individual experience but also the foundation for interaction with others. The synchronization and coordination of dance movements require participants to physically cooperate, and this bodily coordination is not merely a technical requirement but a form of social behavior (Bourdieu, 1977). For instance, in the choreography of Jiamusi, as illustrated in Figure 3, simple body movement lines maintain uniformity and regularity even under the environmental conditions.

Figure 3: The Ningbo Happy Dance Fitness Exercise Demonstration and Exchange Conference.



Source: Li (2013)

The uniformity of clothing makes social identity and gender less significant at that moment, reflecting one of the attributes of social dance. The interaction of bodies in social dance is not only a response to social norms but also a construction of social identity. Through dance, the body participates in the construction of social recognition. The movements and postures in dance are not just confirmations of personal existence

but also representations of social culture and collective identity. Through bodily practice, individuals experience the process of social recognition formation, which is both a cognitive and bodily experience. This deep bodily mechanism involves social relationships through movement perception and action (Zhang & Wang, 2019). In social dance, bodily contact, movement coordination, and rhythmic synchronization enable participants to establish connections on a physical level, experiencing the deeper meaning of social interaction.

### *3.2.2. Cultural Identity in Social Dance*

In social dance, bodily movements, postures, and expressions not only convey individual emotions and intentions but also carry cultural significance. Gabriel (2015), in his theory, mentions that the body, as a vehicle of cultural expression, transmits cultural values through specific movements and forms to both the audience and participants (Gabriel, 2015). In social dance, bodily movements and postures reflect not only individual self-expression but also collective cultural symbols. For example, square dancing in China is not just a form of exercise; it creates a shared cultural space through synchronized steps and movements, allowing dancers to experience cultural identity through bodily resonance. This cultural identity is reinforced through the repetition and sharing of dance movements, forming a collective cultural memory and identity. Jiamusi Fitness Dance, as a localized dance form in China, integrates local characteristics and widespread social habits. Its dance form and movements reflect the uniqueness of local culture. Through bodily participation, dancers not only showcase local cultural features but also deepen their cultural identity in the dynamic bodily experience. For instance, certain specific movements and rhythms in Jiamusi Fitness Dance reflect the lifestyle and social habits of the Northeast region. This bodily language not only conveys the uniqueness of local culture but also fosters cultural identity within local communities. The body does not merely exist within culture and society but is formed through interaction with the environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Bodily movements and postures reflect individual cultural backgrounds and continuously shape and reshape cultural identity in dance practice. While performing Jiamusi Fitness Dance, dancers, through each bodily movement, engage in and redefine community cultural norms, establishing a close connection between cultural expression and identity. Through bodily interaction, participants experience cultural exchange and social connections, thereby achieving cultural expression and identity on a physical level.

## **4. Conclusion**

Social dance is an artistic practice actively engaged in by the masses to meet their spiritual needs. It represents the aesthetic production of people's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions regarding objective realities in the world. Social dance uses body movements as a tool to express the spiritual world, reflecting social culture through physical forms, and materializing the human spirit. This proactive artistic practice is the essence of social dance. This study, through an in-depth analysis of the corporeality and existence of social dance, reveals its multiple functions and significance in social interaction, cultural identity, and individual existence. The corporeality and existence of social dance are closely related; through the physical expression of dance, individuals not only build relationships in social interactions but also find themselves within cultural identity. The application of phenomenology provides a theoretical framework



for a deeper understanding of the complexities of social dance, revealing its profound impact on social and cultural levels. These findings not only enrich the theoretical perspectives of social dance research but also offer valuable references for defining social dance practice and its social value.

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Not applicable.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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