

PASSAGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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ABSTRACT

Passage of Enlightenment is an interdisciplinary dance project that integrates Eastern philosophical concepts and traditional Chinese dance with Western contemporary movement practices. Drawing inspiration from Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, the choreography combines the aesthetics of the Chinese ribbon dance with modern, jazz, and ballet techniques. This fusion aims to create an intercultural artistic dialogue that reflects both spiritual exploration and cultural synthesis.

KEY WORDS

Interculturality, Enlightenment, Chinese ribbon dance, Eastern–Western fusion

Introduction

This dance is the culmination of my choreographic research developed since my graduate studies at the University of Arizona. My intention is to draw upon my Chinese heritage and understanding of Eastern culture to introduce a new perspective into Western contemporary dance.

The piece conveys an intercultural statement through theatrical performance, blending Eastern and Western dance principles. Traditional Chinese ribbon dance movements are integrated with contemporary, jazz, and ballet techniques to produce a unique interdisciplinary form. By merging Eastern historical, philosophical, and spiritual elements—particularly Buddhism and Taoism—with Western dance vocabulary, this project seeks to create an innovative and visually captivating experience.

The vision highlights the coexistence of Western aesthetics with the grace of the Chinese ribbon. Ultimately, this project aims to promote appreciation for Eastern culture and philosophy within both the artistic and broader communities. The choreography aspires not only to achieve interdisciplinary originality but also to reinterpret traditional values in a contemporary and accessible form.

Project Description

Motivation

Studying and collaborating across cultural contexts has allowed me to explore dance from a deeply personal perspective. Through my artistic practice, I have experienced a meaningful cultural exchange by integrating diverse performing arts disciplines with my specialized background in dance.

During my time as a graduate student of Fine Arts at the University of Arizona, I focused on the application of Chinese philosophical traditions within the context of Western modern dance. My goal is to explore the dramatic expressiveness of Chinese dance, one of the world's oldest dance traditions, and

reinterpret it through the lens of Western artistic philosophy to create a new modern dance style.

Philosophical Framework

The title Passage of Enlightenment draws inspiration from The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment (Yuanjue Jing), a foundational Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture. The text explores the distinction between sudden and gradual enlightenment and teaches that human life is filled with suffering; through wisdom and self-cultivation, enlightenment may be achieved.

Master Shengyan explains:

“When facing troubles, we should clearly identify their origin, confront them, deal with them, and then let them go. This is the wisdom of the Buddha.”

This principle extends beyond religion, offering a method for coping with emotional and spiritual challenges. It represents the journey toward Nirvana—a state of ultimate clarity and peace.

Process and Content

The project explores three natural elements—Fire, Water, and Rainbow—each symbolizing different philosophical concepts. The choreography blends Eastern and Western dance techniques, expressing these elements through movement, color, and symbolism. Additionally, a central motif throughout the piece features traditional Chinese ribbon dance. During my training at the National Academy of the Arts in Taiwan, I studied Chinese classical dance and mastered the traditional ribbon technique. The Chinese ribbon dance has ancient roots in ceremonial and festive performances throughout China. It is a key component of Chinese classical dance, famously depicted in the images of the “Flying Apsaras.” These celestial figures represent grace and transcendence, serving as artistic evidence of the ribbon dance tradition.

Choreographic Structure

Fire

Fire symbolizes heat, anger, passion, and tension. Two female dancers dressed in red, each with a red ribbon, embody this element. Initially, their movements are restrained, representing a controlled flame. Gradually, their energy expands as the “fire” spreads, with intensified gestures expressing ferocity and vitality. This section fuses jazz and modern dance techniques with Chinese ribbon dance skills.

Water

Water represents wisdom—calmness, cleansing, and adaptability. A male dancer dressed in white enters with white ribbons, symbolizing water extinguishing fire. As he moves, the dancers in red withdraw, representing the balance between opposing forces of fire, represented by woman, and water, represented by man. His flowing, rippling gestures evoke waves and currents. This section combines traditional ribbon techniques with contemporary forms, symbolizing the dual nature of water as both gentle and strong (Yin and Yang).

Rainbow

The Rainbow represents Nirvana, the state of enlightenment and renewal. Five female dancers appear with multicolored ribbons, each representing one hue of the spectrum. Their movements express rebirth and harmony—light emerging after darkness. This section merges Chinese ribbon dance with contemporary ballet, symbolizing transcendence and spiritual awakening.

Metaphorical Interpretation

The natural elements—Fire and Water—serve as metaphors for the Yin and Yang of Chinese philosophy, representing the dynamic balance and transformation of all things in nature. Another crucial element represented is the Rainbow which signifies sublimation and enlightenment.

The central theme is the inseparable relation between the natural elements—fire and water—and the natural phenomenon—the rainbow. Fire and Water conflict yet coexist, mirroring the struggles inherent in human experience. Through confrontation and harmony between these forces, enlightenment is achieved. The Rainbow becomes a metaphor for spiritual transcendence and unity after struggle.

Technical Approach

Dancers were required to learn Chinese ribbon techniques and combine them with Western modern and ballet movement. This integration demands high levels of discipline and physical awareness. The ribbon emphasizes the expressive use of the torso, arms, and hands, while Western forms contribute elevation, spatial expansion, and dynamic movement. Together, they create a new aesthetic that is both technically innovative and culturally significant.

Music

The music, composed by Dan Carmichael, utilizes electronic synthesizers to express the contrasting moods of nature. The soundscape complements the choreography's dynamic interplay between energy and stillness.

Conclusion

The goal of Passage of Enlightenment is to integrate Eastern and Western cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic principles into a unified modern dance form. To my knowledge, no other choreographer has combined these ideologies in this manner.

The piece interprets Eastern philosophy through Western movement to create a dialogue that is intellectually and emotionally resonant. The process itself represents my own journey of enlightenment—discovering the shared purpose of Eastern and Western dance: the elevation of human expression through movement.

Since 1998, this project has been presented at the University of Arizona, Pima Community College, the University of Oregon, Oregon State University, and other community venues. Through these performances, Passage of Enlightenment has served as a statement of intercultural collaboration and artistic exploration.

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