

A Study on the Formation Mechanism of Cangzhou Luozi Dance from the Perspective of Regional Culture

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Abstract: Cangzhou Luozi Dance, a representative folk performing art in northern China, reflects the rich interaction between geography, cultural tradition, and martial heritage. Its formation and development are rooted in the region's distinctive ecological environment, social customs, and embodied practices derived from martial arts. This study explores the formation mechanism of Cangzhou Luozi Dance from the perspective of regional culture, emphasizing the interrelationship among environmental conditions, humanistic cultivation, and physical expression. The geographical landscape of Cangzhou provides the material and spatial foundation for the dance's dynamic and forceful movements; the humanistic traditions of local communities nurture its ritual and aesthetic dimensions; and the martial arts culture transforms bodily discipline into artistic rhythm and expression. Through a synthesis of historical analysis and cultural interpretation, this research reveals how the Luozi Dance embodies the spirit of northern Chinese communities, characterized by strength, resilience, and collective vitality. The study argues that Cangzhou Luozi Dance functions as both a living record of local identity and a creative expression of cultural continuity, offering valuable insight into the interaction between regional ecology, embodied practice, and artistic innovation within Chinese folk dance traditions.

Keywords: Cangzhou Luozi Dance; regional culture; martial arts tradition; folk performance; cultural formation

1. Introduction

Cangzhou, located in southeastern Hebei Province along the Bohai Sea, has long been celebrated as the "hometown of martial arts". Its broad plains, fertile farmlands, and intricate water systems have fostered a culture marked by diligence, courage, and openness. Within this environment, the Cangzhou Luozi Dance emerged as a representative folk performing art that integrates entertainment, ritual, and social participation, expressing the collective vitality and aesthetic spirit of the local people.

Historical evidence indicates that Luozi originated from ancient folk rituals and agricultural festivals. Over time, it evolved by merging elements of folk drama, martial arts, and dance movements, creating a vigorous and rhythmic performance form. Its dynamic postures and powerful gestures embody both the physical energy of labor and the bold temperament of northern Chinese communities. Thus, Luozi Dance serves not only as recreation but also as a medium through which moral values, social ethics, and collective identity are expressed.

This study approaches Luozi Dance from the perspective of regional culture, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: geography, humanities, and martial arts. The geographical environment shapes the body's movement and rhythm; the humanistic tradition imbues the dance with symbolic meaning and ethical values; and the martial arts heritage transforms combat gestures into artistic expression. Together, these factors form a

dynamic cultural mechanism that links nature, society, and body.

By combining historical analysis and ethnographic insight, this paper aims to reveal how Luozi Dance embodies the interaction between ecology, human spirit, and bodily expression. Through this exploration, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how regional folk dances reflect the cultural logic and artistic vitality of traditional Chinese society in its continuous process of inheritance and renewal.

2. Natural Geography and Cultural Ecology: The Living Environment of Luozi Dance

Cangzhou lies in the center of the North China Plain, a region of fertile land, intersecting waterways, and a temperate but windy climate. Known historically as “the tail end of the nine rivers”, it has long been a fertile meeting point of agriculture, fishing, and trade. The abundance of arable land and water resources allowed for stable agricultural production, while the rivers supported transportation and commerce [1]. Such an environment encouraged both physical resilience and cultural creativity. The steady rhythm of agricultural life, following seasonal changes, structured the social and emotional rhythms of the people. During the intervals between planting and harvest, villagers celebrated festivals and rituals that gradually evolved into dance, song, and theatrical performance. The transformation of labor movements into dance gestures reflected how the natural geography nurtured a culture grounded in the physical and expressive body.

The movement vocabulary of Luozi Dance originates from daily agricultural experience. Repetitive actions such as lifting tools, striking the earth, and swinging arms became the foundation for dance motifs characterized by strength and rhythm [2]. These gestures were not only functional but also expressive, transforming the laboring body into an aesthetic subject. In this process, the physical experience of working the land became the symbolic foundation of artistic creation. The gestures of Luozi Dance thus encapsulate both the endurance of the local people and their emotional relationship with the land.

Cangzhou’s geographic location made it a cultural crossroads, linking the Central Plains with the Bohai coastal region. Its proximity to Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, and Henan enabled active cultural exchange through trade and migration [3]. The Grand Canal and regional markets brought diverse cultural influences into contact with local customs. Folk drama, opera, acrobatics, and storytelling from other regions blended with native traditions of ritual and performance [4]. Luozi Dance absorbed operatic postures, rhythmic phrasing, and symbolic gestures while retaining the raw energy and straightforward temperament of northern folk culture. Through this process of integration, the dance developed a distinctive identity that combined the elegance of artistic performance with the strength of everyday life.

The natural environment also shaped the physical habits and aesthetic orientation of the people. The flat terrain and strong winds of Cangzhou required physical endurance and balance. The people learned to stand firmly against the wind, using the waist and legs as the center of strength [5]. These bodily habits reappear in the dance’s movement structure: the stance is low and stable, the arms extend outward with force, and movement originates from the core of the body. Such physical vocabulary reflects a dynamic relationship between resistance and release, control and expression. The energy circulates through the body rather than dissipating, giving the dance its distinctive sense of continuity and vitality.

The ecological environment not only shaped physical form but also psychological character. The openness of the plains cultivated generosity and courage, while the challenges of nature instilled perseverance and a strong sense of collective spirit. These qualities are vividly reflected in the performance style of Luozi Dance, which features powerful rhythms, coordinated group movements, and expressive gestures [6]. The sound of drums and the synchronized stamping of feet convey both the resilience of individuals and the unity of the community. As the drumbeat echoes across the open land, it becomes a powerful metaphor for the shared pulse that connects human life with the rhythms of nature.

The dance also mirrors the cyclical patterns of the natural world. The alternation between stillness and movement, tension and release, parallels the seasonal shifts of the agricultural year and the changing rhythms of wind and water. Through this interplay, Luozi Dance conveys an embodied philosophy of balance that arises from close contact with nature [7]. The body becomes both a vessel and a medium for expressing the harmony between humans and the environment.

Moreover, Cangzhou's ecological conditions favored communal rather than individual performance. The open fields and village squares that served as natural stages reinforced the collective dimension of folk dance. Luozi performances typically involve groups of dancers moving in rhythmic unison, emphasizing coordination and shared emotion [8]. The circular formations and repeated movements symbolize the cycle of labor and renewal in agricultural life. The performance thus represents not only aesthetic enjoyment but also social cooperation and ecological harmony.

In essence, the natural geography and ecology of Cangzhou are active participants in the creation of Luozi Dance. The land, climate, and lifestyle together shaped both the physical language and the emotional tone of the dance. The performers' bodies carry the memory of the environment, embodying generations of labor, adaptation, and creativity [8]. Luozi Dance, therefore, is not an abstract artistic invention but the crystallization of the region's lived experience. It stands as a living testimony to the intimate dialogue between people and the land, demonstrating how geography and ecology can be transformed into expressive art through the medium of human movement.

3. Humanistic Traditions and Social Structure: Folk Nourishment and Spiritual Character

The origins of Luozi Dance are deeply rooted in the festive and ritual life of the people of Cangzhou. Traditionally, it was performed during major communal events such as the Spring Festival, temple fairs, and Shehuo celebrations that blended ritual and entertainment within the rhythms of agricultural life [9]. During these gatherings, villagers expressed gratitude for harvests, prayed for protection from disaster, and shared collective joy through singing, drumming, and dancing. Luozi Dance therefore functioned as both a ritual of blessing and a form of communal recreation that strengthened social bonds and embodied the unity of spiritual and social life.

In its earliest stage, Luozi Dance was not an independent art form but an integral part of everyday community activities. It reflected the fusion of ritual and custom, a core value in traditional Chinese culture. Dancing and drumming in open spaces or temple courtyards symbolized harmony between humans and nature as well as among villagers themselves [10]. Through vivid and rhythmic movement, performers expressed ideals such as diligence, cooperation, and reverence for the divine. Farmers, warriors, and deities were represented in the dance, transforming moral imagination and daily experience into visual form. Over time, village-based performance groups known as "Luozi societies" emerged, composed mostly of ordinary villagers. These troupes valued participation and collective enjoyment over profit. Transmission occurred through oral instruction and apprenticeship, emphasizing not only skills but also ethical values and community cohesion. This form of "self-performance for self-enjoyment" made Luozi an inseparable part of social life and a carrier of moral education.

During the late Qing and Republican periods, dramatic changes in social and economic structures affected folk traditions. Industrialization, urbanization, and new market activities reshaped rural life. As temple rituals declined and public entertainment expanded, Luozi Dance gradually shifted from sacred ritual to secular performance [11]. Markets, fairs, and festivals became new venues where villagers, travelers, and merchants gathered to enjoy the art. The performances grew in scale, incorporated opera, storytelling, and martial displays, and developed a richer visual language. This period marked a transition from ritual function to artistic expression while maintaining the dance's communal essence.

In the mid-twentieth century, local cultural institutions began to preserve and modernize folk arts. During the 1950s and 1960s, scholars and artists collected and adapted Luozi for stage performance. Choreographers refined its rhythm, structure, and costumes, transforming it into an art suitable for theatre while keeping its regional vitality [12]. This modernization did not sever the link with tradition but reinterpreted it. Luozi Dance evolved into a bridge between rural life and modern cultural expression. It became both a heritage practice and a creative form that connected people with their past. The coexistence of stage and folk versions reflects the balance between institutional adaptation and community spontaneity. Official performances emphasized discipline and symmetry, while village performances retained improvisation and emotional warmth. This coexistence shows Luozi's flexibility in negotiating between authenticity and innovation.

Cangzhou's people, shaped by their geography and history, are known for bravery, resilience, and honesty.

These traits are embodied in the dance's physical vocabulary. Its bold gestures, rapid rhythm, and dynamic postures mirror the spirit of the region [13]. Movements such as striking the Luozi, stamping the ground, and turning the body express the beauty of vitality and strength. Each gesture carries emotional weight and moral significance. The discipline required in performance symbolizes virtues like endurance, harmony, and integrity. Through movement, the body becomes a moral text and a vessel of collective values.

Religious and secular meanings coexist in Luozi Dance. Ritual gestures such as offering to the gods, guarding the household, and expelling misfortune come from Taoist and folk traditions and express reverence for cosmic harmony. Other motifs such as drumming the flowers or waving the sleeves belong to festive contexts like weddings and harvest celebrations [14]. Together, these elements reveal a worldview that unites sacred devotion with everyday joy. The dance thus becomes a cultural medium that bridges spiritual and worldly life.

Luozi's aesthetic style also reflects regional psychology and social solidarity. In northern China's harsh but communal environment, the dance became a means for people to express pride, unity, and optimism. The rhythm of drums and synchronized group movements conveys both physical strength and moral cohesion. This collective aesthetic celebrates balance between control and emotion, tradition and renewal.

Ultimately, Luozi Dance is more than performance. It is an embodied expression of cultural philosophy rooted in human labor, faith, and emotion. Its continued vitality illustrates how art can sustain community identity while adapting to changing times. By connecting history, moral life, and collective experience, Luozi Dance stands as one of northern China's most powerful examples of living folk heritage and enduring artistic creativity.

4. Martial Arts Culture and Performance Form: The Artistic Formation of Bodily Logic

4.1. The Cultural Foundation of Cangzhou Martial Arts

Cangzhou has been renowned throughout Chinese history as a stronghold of martial arts, encapsulated in the saying "Confucius and Mencius represent the culture of learning, while Cangzhou represents the culture of martial strength." Historical records such as The Annals of Cangzhou note that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the region was filled with martial arts academies and training halls. A wide variety of martial styles originated here, including Tongbei Quan, Xingyi Quan, and Bajiquan [15]. These styles shared a common emphasis on strength, agility, and the coordination between internal power and external form. In everyday life, martial practice became a part of the social fabric, a way of cultivating moral virtue, discipline, and community solidarity. The ethics of loyalty, perseverance, and righteousness embedded in martial training also became moral standards guiding interpersonal relations and social life.

This deeply rooted martial ethos provided both the physical model and the spiritual foundation for Luozi Dance. Many of the dance's characteristic movements, such as striking, leaping, turning, and spinning, can be traced to martial routines. The dancers' firm stances, open gestures, and bursts of energy reflect the structure and rhythm of Cangzhou's martial traditions. During performance, the body shifts between stillness and motion, contraction and expansion, embodying the martial ideal of maintaining inner calm while expressing outward strength. The result is an artistic transformation in which combat techniques become aesthetic movement. Luozi Dance therefore reveals a continuous link between martial practice and folk performance, illustrating how physical discipline in one realm can evolve into artistic expression in another.

Cangzhou's martial tradition also shapes the dance's social meaning. Martial arts were not merely a form of fighting but a moral practice, symbolizing courage and justice. By integrating these values into dance, Luozi became a vehicle for expressing collective strength and moral order. The performers' upright posture and precise control of energy evoke both power and integrity. Every gesture communicates confidence, determination, and harmony between the physical and the spiritual. Through this process, the body becomes an archive of cultural ethics, transmitting the ideals of bravery, discipline, and balance that have long defined Cangzhou's local identity.

4.2. The Structural Parallels of Martial and Dance Expression

Viewed from the perspective of body expression, the movement language of Luozi Dance demonstrates a

deep structural similarity to martial performance. The alternation of opening and closing, rising and falling, and turning and pivoting in the dance parallels the dynamic rhythm of martial forms. In both practices, the performer's control of energy, breathing, and rhythm determines the expressive effect. The body acts as a mediator between strength and grace, between control and spontaneity.

This phenomenon can be described as a “martial-dance parallelism”, where martial and dance movements share a common physical and philosophical foundation. The martial practice emphasizes energy circulation and rhythm of breath, while the dance translates these internal sensations into visible beauty. In both, movement originates from the same understanding of bodily power—the unity of mind, breath, and action. The precision and coordination required in martial routines provide the technical foundation for the dancers' stability and balance, while the expressive variation of the dance enriches the aesthetic dimensions of martial motion.

Through this fusion, Luozi Dance transforms the discipline of combat into the joy of performance. The dancer's movements are forceful yet fluid, structured yet spontaneous. The physical vocabulary of the martial body is reimagined through rhythm, music, and collective movement, creating a choreography that celebrates both physical power and human emotion. “Within the dance lies the fist, and within the fist lies the dance”. This interpenetration expresses the aesthetic ideal of balance between hardness and softness. The strength of martial movement is softened by rhythm and melody, while the grace of dance gains depth through the solidity of martial technique.

In this process, bodily movement becomes a form of storytelling. The performer's gestures convey more than visual beauty; they articulate cultural memory and emotional resonance. The tension and release of energy, the pause between movements, and the echo of drumbeats narrate the collective experience of labor, resistance, and celebration. The dance thereby becomes a cultural language through which the community communicates its values, emotions, and aspirations. The power embedded in each motion reflects the endurance of the people, while the rhythmic flow embodies their optimism and vitality.

Luozi Dance shows that the human body functions as both a cultural archive and a medium of creation. Its martial origins provide not only structure and rhythm but also a worldview that celebrates the harmony between strength and beauty, discipline and freedom. The dance conveys the idea that power should be guided by moral purpose and that artistic grace emerges from inner balance. The people of Cangzhou, shaped by their environment and history, embody these values through the fusion of martial and dance movements, creating a form of physical poetry that is deeply rooted in their land and cultural spirit.

4.3. The Artistic Transformation of the Performance System

As Luozi Dance developed, its performance structure gradually became more organized and differentiated. Distinct roles and performance types emerged, most notably the division between “Wen Luozi” and “Wu Luozi”. The “Wen” form is characterized by gentleness, refinement, and lyrical movement, often used to depict daily life scenes or expressions of etiquette. In contrast, the “Wu” form is vigorous, dynamic, and exuberant, focusing on displays of power and skill. It is usually performed during festive events or martial demonstrations. These two modes together illustrate the balance between emotional subtlety and physical intensity that defines the art.

The coexistence of “Wen” and “Wu” not only reflects aesthetic variation but also reveals a deep cultural logic. In Chinese philosophy, the complementarity of “Wen” (civil) and “Wu” (martial) represents the ideal balance between inner virtue and outer strength. Luozi Dance embodies this duality through its performance system: the gentle movements of “Wen” correspond to moral cultivation and social harmony, while the robust gestures of “Wu” represent vigor, courage, and action. The alternation between these forms creates a rhythm that mirrors both the moral order and the physical vitality of Cangzhou society.

The transformation of the performance system also demonstrates the artistic maturation of Luozi Dance. What began as spontaneous folk movement gradually evolved into a structured form with defined choreography, rhythm patterns, and symbolic gestures. Through repeated practice and transmission, the community established a shared aesthetic language that encodes both artistic expression and collective memory. The dance thereby transcends entertainment and becomes a “bodily narrative system” that communicates the region's cultural spirit—diligence, bravery, generosity, and unity.

Each performance of Luozi Dance can be viewed as a reenactment of these values. The dancer's grounded

posture symbolizes the strength of the earth; the upward motion reflects aspiration and vitality; the synchronized group formation expresses cooperation and collective will. Through the interplay of movement and rhythm, the dance constructs a visual representation of the moral and emotional life of the people. In this way, Luozi Dance functions as a symbolic vehicle of regional identity, encapsulating the harmony between physical strength and ethical consciousness.

Ultimately, the artistic evolution of Luozi Dance reveals how martial culture and aesthetic practice converge to form a distinctive body logic. The dance's vigor derives from martial discipline, while its grace stems from cultural refinement. Its continuity across generations demonstrates not only the persistence of tradition but also the creativity inherent in the act of embodiment. Luozi Dance thus stands as both an artistic form and a living expression of the moral and physical ideals of the Cangzhou people, where the human body becomes the most eloquent medium for articulating the unity of culture, spirit, and art.

5. Cultural Integration and Historical Inheritance: The Reproduction Mechanism of Regional Art

5.1. Interregional Exchange and Cultural Co-Construction

Cangzhou's open geographical location has historically facilitated the flow and fusion of diverse cultural influences. The city's position between the Central Plains, the Bohai coast, and the Beijing-Tianjin area enabled continuous interaction with other artistic traditions, making it a cultural crossroads in northern China. During the late Qing and Republican periods, various operatic forms such as Peking Opera, Pingju, and Hebei Bangzi reached Cangzhou and profoundly shaped its local performing arts. These theatrical traditions introduced new techniques of gesture, rhythm, and narrative structure that enriched the expressive vocabulary of Luozi Dance. The result was a hybrid performance form characterized by the interweaving of acting, martial arts, and dance—a synthesis often described as “drama within dance and dance within martial movement.”

The musical dimension of Luozi Dance also benefited from interregional exchange. Folk instruments such as gongs, drums, suona, and flutes became integral components of the performance, providing dynamic rhythm and emotional resonance. The combination of percussion and melody created an aesthetic that was both powerful and celebratory. The interactive relationship between music and dance formed a complete artistic system in which rhythm guided movement, and movement, in turn, intensified rhythm. This circular relationship gave Luozi Dance its distinctive vitality and emotional impact, allowing performers and audiences to experience a sense of communal participation and shared cultural identity. The process of interregional cultural co-construction thus endowed Luozi Dance with both local authenticity and cross-cultural inclusiveness, making it a living example of how traditional art adapts through openness and exchange.

5.2. Transmission and Innovation in Modern Social Contexts

In the twenty-first century, the recognition of Cangzhou Luozi Dance as an item of local intangible cultural heritage marked a turning point in its preservation and revitalization. Under the guidance of government cultural policies, local authorities and art organizations have launched numerous initiatives to promote the dance through public performances, festivals, and educational programs. The inclusion of Luozi Dance in school art curricula has further strengthened its cultural transmission. Through rhythm exercises, body training, and creative reenactment, students not only acquire artistic skills but also develop an understanding of local traditions and collective identity. Educational practice has therefore become an important means of sustaining cultural continuity.

Meanwhile, contemporary choreographers and performers have explored creative ways to blend traditional forms with modern stage aesthetics. Innovations in lighting, stage design, and multimedia presentation have added new layers to the visual and emotional expression of Luozi Dance. These efforts preserve the core essence of the folk art, characterized by vigor, simplicity, and a sense of community, while presenting it in forms that appeal to contemporary audiences. This kind of regenerative innovation represents a broader movement in the preservation of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, where tradition is sustained through flexible adaptation rather than rigid imitation. The capacity of Luozi Dance to evolve through artistic transformation allows it to remain meaningful in the modern era and continue to thrive as a dynamic symbol of living culture.

The collaboration between cultural institutions, community groups, and individual artists also contributes to this renewal. Local festivals such as the Cangzhou Folk Arts Fair have become important platforms for performance, research, and cultural dialogue. These events not only showcase the dance but also contextualize it within broader discussions on cultural sustainability. As a result, Luozi Dance has evolved from a regional art form into a cultural emblem representing the harmony between tradition and innovation.

5.3. Reconstruction of Regional Identity and Cultural Recognition

In an era of globalization and urbanization, regional cultures face increasing pressure toward homogenization. Against this backdrop, Cangzhou Luozi Dance serves as a vital marker of local identity and cultural distinctiveness. Its preservation and performance are not merely acts of artistic continuation but processes of cultural self-recognition. Through participation in festivals, school programs, and staged productions, the people of Cangzhou reaffirm their connection to their historical roots and collective memory. The dance thus functions as a form of “cultural self-narration,” through which the community expresses its unique worldview, values, and emotional landscape.

Moreover, the practice of Luozi Dance fosters social cohesion and intergenerational dialogue. Elders transmit techniques, stories, and moral values to younger generations, while youth reinterpret these traditions in contemporary idioms. This dynamic interaction strengthens cultural belonging and cultivates respect for heritage within the framework of modern life. By bridging tradition and modernity, Luozi Dance illustrates how local culture can actively respond to the challenges of modernization, transforming from a rural ritual into a contemporary expression of cultural confidence.

Ultimately, the transmission of Luozi Dance represents more than the preservation of an art form; it signifies the reconstruction of regional identity in the modern age. As an artistic embodiment of Cangzhou’s history, spirit, and social life, Luozi Dance continues to inspire a sense of continuity and pride among its practitioners and audiences. Its ongoing vitality demonstrates how traditional Chinese art can renew itself through integration and innovation, remaining both faithful to its origins and responsive to the evolving realities of contemporary society.

6. Conclusions

The formation of Cangzhou Luozi Dance is not the result of a single factor but the outcome of long-term interaction among geography, humanistic tradition, and martial arts culture. The flat and expansive terrain of the North China Plain shaped the physical strength and grounded movement that define the dance’s structure. The region’s deep humanistic heritage provided spiritual nourishment, infusing the art with moral and aesthetic meaning, while martial culture offered a disciplined and vigorous bodily logic that transformed physical training into expressive movement. Together, these elements created a distinctive artistic system that embodies both regional character and cultural continuity.

Viewed from the lens of regional culture, Cangzhou Luozi Dance can be regarded as a living, embodied text of local heritage. Through its movements, rhythms, and collective performances, it materializes the historical memory, social temperament, and aesthetic ideals of the Cangzhou people. Each performance reactivates cultural memory and affirms a sense of belonging to the land, transforming everyday gestures into a shared artistic and spiritual language. The enduring vitality of Luozi Dance demonstrates the adaptive wisdom of Chinese folk art, which constantly renews itself while preserving its essence.

Future research may explore Luozi Dance through approaches such as visual anthropology, dance semiotics, and digital ethnography to analyze its cross-media transmission and digital preservation. Such studies will deepen the understanding of how regional folk arts can be revitalized in contemporary contexts, offering new perspectives on the sustainable inheritance of China’s intangible cultural heritage.

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