

Embodied Narratives of National Industry: Emotional Structure and Choreographic Innovation in Chinese Dance Drama *Red Flag*

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Abstract: The dance drama *Red Flag*, set against the backdrop of China's automotive industrial development, pioneers innovative stage representation of national industrial themes. Through multifaceted strategies, the production transforms the mechanical logic of industrial production into vivid corporeal language. Geometric choreography of workers' group dances, anthropomorphic stage design, and symbolic encoding of red elements collectively articulate the aesthetic order of industrial systems while imbuing mechanical symbols with emotional and spiritual resonance. The work balances historical gravitas with individual lived experiences by intertwining depersonalized narratives of collective grandeur with nuanced secular emotions. Choreographically, it constructs an innovative mechanical mimicry movement system integrated with electronic industrial soundscapes, exploring the aesthetic transformation of bodily experiences during industrialization. Within a globalized context, the production reconstructs cultural identity mechanisms through bodily memory, symbolic construction, and corporeal praxis, offering an artistic paradigm for revitalizing industrial heritage and advancing industrial-themed dance dramas across multiple dimensions.

Keywords: dance drama, national industry, emotional structure, choreographic language

1. Introduction

In the realm of dance art, the creation of industrial-themed dance dramas has long navigated thorny terrain, grappling with dual challenges of narrative construction and emotional expression.^[1] Dance, as an art form inherently adept at lyrical communication, appears fundamentally at odds with the cold rationality of mechanical production lines embedded in industrial themes. The critical challenge lies in transmuting the steel torrent of industrial production into dynamic bodily rhythms and rendering the profound essence of industrial civilization through living dance forms—a core creative imperative that artists have strived to resolve.

The *Red Flag*, meticulously crafted by Jilin City Song and Dance Troupe, stands as a shining exemplar addressing this conundrum. Centered on China's monumental automotive industrial history, the drama intricately weaves the grand narrative of national industrialization with the intimate life trajectories of two generations within a single family. Within the confined theatrical space, it constructs multilayered dialogues between body and machinery, sublimity and mundanity, history and contemporaneity. Since its acclaimed 2018 premiere, *Red Flag* has not only secured China's prestigious Lotus Award in dance but also catalyzed rigorous academic discourse on the translational mechanisms of industrial-themed choreographic language.

2. Body Translation of Mechanical Image

The essential task of dance in portraying industrial themes lies in converting inorganic mechanical logic into organic, vital bodily expression. *Red Flag* achieves this transformation through three sophisticated strategies:

First, the geometric choreography of workers' group dances mirrors the rhythmic order of industrial production, functioning as spatial translation and bodily embodiment of assembly lines. Dancers construct visual metaphors of mechanical aesthetics through precise movement control and formation shifts. Angular trajectories of arm extensions and retractions simulate automated equipment rhythms, while elastic knee vibrations translate kinetic energy transmission, replicating reciprocating motions of mechanical systems. Transcending mere theatrical representation, this choreographic approach elevates

standardized industrial workflows into dynamic installations of ordered beauty. In Act II, over thirty dancers form an industrial human matrix through topological transformations. Wave-like arm undulations create continuous transmission systems, while crisscrossing steps delineate spatial grids—scenes that preserve mechanical rigor yet breathe with organic vitality. By dissecting movement durations and quantifying energy transfers, this human conveyor belt metamorphoses industrial standardization into corporeal landscapes pulsating with life. Audiences thus perceive not only the immediacy of production sites but also, through kinetic energy mapping, the intricate synergy and tension between individuals and systems.

Secondly, the stage installation design boldly breaks through the single function of traditional stage design as environmental decoration, endowing industrial symbols with deep semantic expression of subjectivity. An overhead automobile skeleton undergoes tripartite symbolic metamorphosis: as industrial relic, its angular geometry traces historical contours of industrial progress; as emotional vessel of collective memory, its time-stained surfaces and metallic sheen visualize temporal sedimentation; ultimately, as animate dance protagonist, it engages in energy exchanges with human bodies, merging materiality with sentience. A symbolic father figure caressing the chassis—fingertips grazing metal, arms entwining steel beams, torso leaning against frames—dissolves the body-machine dichotomy, etching thermal memories onto cold machinery. Act IV's technological innovation sequence achieves aesthetic transcendence: Projection mapping transmutes the chassis into dynamic data streams, through which dancers navigate virtual realms. This symbiosis of physical and digital dimensions poetically articulates the multiplicity of bodily existence amid technological evolution.

Third, political coding embedded within the symbolic system ^[2] endows industrial imagery with precise and profound value orientations, enabling it to bear richer cultural and spiritual connotations. Throughout the production, the recurring red elements—red notebooks, scarves, lighting, and red neckerchiefs—function as an agile semiotic thread with layered significations. This chromatic motif operates triply: as raw material in workshops, symbolizing the physical foundations of industrial production; as bloodshed on battlefields, allegorizing immense sacrifices made for national industrialization; and as a genetic code intricately woven into two generations' psyches, transmitting an indomitable pioneering ethos. The notebook, as the central prop, undergoes a metamorphosis heavy with historical resonance: evolving from a battlefield relic carrying fallen comrades' hopes, to a technical manual documenting automotive manufacturing, then to a digital terminal emblematic of the information age. Each material transformation precisely mirrors industrial civilization's progression through mechanical, electromechanical, and digital epochs. Such ingenious semiotic transmutation not only reconstructs a continuous historical consciousness but also anchors the spirit of national industry onto tangible artifacts, ensuring its transmission across temporal currents.

3. Dynamic Equilibrium Between the Sublime and the Mundane

The dance drama confronts a unique and intricate dilemma in emotional expression: it must vividly manifest the collective sublime spirit embedded in industrial construction while authentically preserving the delicate textures of individual destinies amidst historical torrents. This dual task allows audiences to resonate with both grand narratives and characters' intimate emotions. *Red Flag*, through its meticulous configuration of emotional hierarchies, ingeniously resolves this connotation - laden paradox.

In articulating sublime emotions, the choreographer employs a depersonalization strategy with remarkable ingenuity. In Act I, fallen soldiers materialize as standardized combat units within group tableaux. Their regimented movements coalesce into an abstract yet awe - inspiring heroic genealogy. This approach avoids fragmentation from excessive individual narratives, transforming sacrifice into a collective will that transcends personal boundaries. Audiences thus experience not only visceral shock but profound comprehension of an era when people willingly sacrificed everything for national and communal ideals.

Conversely, secular emotions function as vital counterweights to historical gravitas, operating like gentle spring breezes that warm the monumental narrative. The exquisitely crafted romantic subplot between the parents intertwines with industrial progress through symbiotic choreography. Tentative fingertip contacts near lathes convey nascent love's shy tenderness; bodies entwined amidst blueprints reveal marital understanding; impassioned lifts before finished trucks symbolize love's ascension through shared struggle. These scenes embed private affections within national narratives, rendering romance a tender propellant of historical momentum while offering emotional solace amidst industrial grandeur. The domestic vignette in Act III resonates with layered significance—the gentle curvature of her neck,

revealed during familial intimacy, stands in stark contrast to the angular rigidity of her shoulder-neck silhouette while operating machinery in the workshop. This meticulous detail epitomizes socialist builders' dual identities—both industrial contributors and nurturing parents—forging multidimensional personas that resonate with audiences through tangible humanity.

The work's spatiotemporal architecture of emotional expression further conceals profound political allegories. Flashbacks to Korean War memories employ cold-toned corporeal language: soldiers' frozen collapse postures crystallize war's cruelty; the father's spasmodic finger tremors externalize survivor's guilt; slow-motion notebook transfers amplify deathbed commissions into visceral trauma. Collectively, these elements compose physiological inscriptions of historical wounds, immersing audiences in cataclysmic yet poignant memories. This starkly contrasts with reform-era study-abroad sequences, where dancers' fluid modern movements—resembling data streams in their weightless agility—embody globalization's technological optimism and intellectual openness. Such thermal contrasts in emotional tonality not only annotate distinct historical phases but subtly reveal state narratives' strategic appropriation and reshaping of individual memories across temporal divides.

4. Spatio-Temporal Suturing of Historical Memory

The dance drama *Red Flag* skillfully constructs a clear genealogy of industrial spirit through a thoughtfully choreographed intergenerational bodily dialogue. In the prologue, the father seated in a wheelchair functions not only as a narrator but also as a living historical archive. His slightly trembling right hand carries the deep muscle memory of once gripping machine handles—recalling the fervent labor on the production line—and simultaneously embodies a physiological reenactment of a dying comrade's final entrustment, symbolizing a responsibility that transcends life and death.

When the returning protagonist, freshly trained abroad, deconstructs his father's era-specific movements with dance gestures marked by modern sensibilities, the stark contrast in bodily language and choreographic styles becomes a vivid metaphor for the technological and ideological chasm between generations. This juxtaposition underscores the profound shifts in lifestyle and value systems shaped by differing historical contexts.

The production's reconstruction of memory also leverages cutting-edge technologies emblematic of our era. In the latest adaptation, augmented reality (AR) plays a crucial role by projecting archival images of the First Automobile Works directly onto the current assembly lines. As young workers perform alongside these projections, they appear to traverse time and engage in a dialogue across generations. This method renders industrial memory more immediate and immersive, allowing audiences to viscerally grasp the historical trajectory and enduring legacy of industrial development.

The topological transformation of stage space in the production further embodies a historically reflective perspective. A mobile truck prop creates an atmosphere of volatility and danger on the Korean War battlefield, immersing the audience in the intensity of conflict. In contrast, the gridded spatial layout of the planned economy-era workshop reflects the highly organized and disciplined nature of that period's industrial production, symbolizing the collectivist ethos underpinning industrial construction. Meanwhile, the globalization-era multimedia installations and stage settings create an open, pluralistic sense of space, suggesting the fluidity and uncertainty of production relations in the post-Fordist era.

When the team of returning engineers dances within this dynamic environment, their movements break from the linear conventions of traditional industrial choreography, instead embracing a freer, more agile mode of expression. This spatial narration not only re-enacts the history of industrial development on stage but also boldly forecasts how future technological revolutions might redefine the way bodies are disciplined and mobilized.

5. Choreographic Innovation in Industrial Aesthetics

Translating industrial civilization into the language of dance has long posed a fundamental challenge: how to preserve the artistic purity of the medium while accurately capturing the distinctive technological aesthetics of industrial production. *Red Flag* addresses this tension through a radical reconfiguration of the perceptual relationship between the human body and machinery. At the level of choreographic language, it achieves a groundbreaking breakthrough—crafting a unique poetics of industrial dance.

In terms of movement vocabulary, the creative team developed an original system of mechanical mimesis. Drawing on field research conducted at the First Automobile Works in Changchun, the dancers

meticulously observed key mechanical processes—such as the piston’s reciprocating motion, the conveyor belt’s uniform glide, and the precise interlocking of gears—and translated these into geometrically refined bodily expressions. In the assembly line sequence of Act II, the dancers’ spinal articulations emulate the straight, forceful trajectories of hydraulically driven robotic arms; the rhythmic undulations of their scapulae simulate the piston cycles of a steam engine; and the controlled tremors of their knees replicate the 72-strokes-per-minute operating rhythm of a stamping press with remarkable fidelity.

On the musical front, the composer moves beyond conventional symphonic orchestration, pioneering a sonic landscape rooted in the soundscape of industrial labor. In the Act III scene depicting a critical phase of technological problem-solving, sampled sounds from actual workshops—including metal clangs, steam bursts, and conveyor friction—are digitally processed and woven into the percussive score, yielding a distinctive symphony of production. This aural-industrial fusion enhances the embodied authenticity of the choreography and deepens its immersive effect.

These choreographic innovations are not merely aesthetic flourishes; they bear profound philosophical significance. By transforming the principles of time-motion study from industrial management into a framework of rhythm-form analysis in choreographic design, *Red Flag* illustrates how industrialization has not only altered material modes of production but has also reconditioned the human sensorium. The angular, machine-inspired movements seen throughout the performance are, in essence, aesthetic inscriptions of the bodily discipline imposed by industrial modernity. Simultaneously, the use of digital technologies to deconstruct conventional stage space anticipates a paradigmatic shift in embodied experience characteristic of the post-industrial era.

6. Cultural Identity Mechanisms of Industrial Bodies

Within the dual contexts of globalization and post-industrialization, *Red Flag* offers a nuanced exploration of cultural identity as it relates to the industrial body. Through its richly layered choreographic narrative, the production constructs a unique system of cultural identification—manifested through bodily memory, bodily symbols, and bodily practices—that provides a deeply resonant artistic articulation of industrial workers’ identity formation.

From the perspective of bodily memory, *Red Flag* evokes collective historical consciousness through the repetition of specific gestures and postures. The dialectical shift between the instrumental body and the ritual body forms the core of industrial identity construction in the work. In the second act, during the scene of technological problem-solving, the dancers’ hand movements bear symbolic weight. When fingers simulate the act of turning a wrench, their precision and mechanical rhythm reflect the instrumental rationality of a productive body—one that serves as an extension of industrial apparatus. However, when both hands raise a car chassis in a solemn, deliberate motion, the body is reconfigured as a ritualized vessel, imbuing the act with reverence and spiritual elevation. This transition invokes anthropologist Victor Turner’s theory of liminality^[3], in which the body inhabits an in-between state—negotiating the poles of utilitarian function and symbolic meaning. In this sense, the laboring body exists as a site of industrial transformation and value-oriented identification, embodying not only physical productivity but also the collective memory and emotional weight of industrial progress.

On the level of symbolic construction, the choreographers adeptly distill and reinterpret bodily signifiers unique to Northeast China’s industrial culture. The stooped posture of veteran workers, for instance, is derived from years spent bent under vehicles, performing undercarriage maintenance—a bodily memory inscribed with traces of physical sacrifice. The splayed gait evolved as a means of safely navigating oil-slicked factory floors, while the tilted shoulder-neck alignment reflects the ergonomic adaptations formed by repetitive assembly-line labor. These physiological traits, once habitual, are elevated through choreographic stylization into a distinct vocabulary of industrial aesthetics. Their resonance is amplified by visual motifs projected onto the stage—such as the silhouette of a Liberation Truck or the iconic gate of the First Automobile Works in Changchun. When an elder worker performs with a stooped posture beneath the outline of the Liberation Truck, the bodily signifier and visual symbol converge, coalescing into a powerful representation of Northeast China’s industrial heritage and reinforcing the audience’s cultural recognition of this legacy.^[4]

The play also touches on the topic of techno-body identity within the globalized context. In the fourth act’s scene, students returning from overseas studies deconstruct and reconfigure traditional workwear elements, merging canvas work pants with cyberpunk aesthetics through their embodied performance, which physically enacts both the rupture and reformation of cultural identity. Amid cultural collisions,

the industrial body neither clings entirely to tradition nor wholly embraces foreign influences, but rather negotiates dynamically to forge new identity formations. Their choreography preserves the emphasis on strength and rhythm intrinsic to traditional industrial dances while incorporating modern dance's fluidity and innovation, symbolizing their reinterpretation of industrial culture within globalizing currents. This demonstrates industrial culture's adaptability and creativity in cross-cultural exchanges, enriching the identity connotations of industrial laborers through this transnational dialogue.

7. A Reactivating Industrial Memory in the Contemporary Context

Amid global transformation and technological iteration, Red Flag presents a unique artistic paradigm for revitalizing industrial cultural heritage. Rather than static displays of industrial symbols, the production employs metaphorical bodily narratives to weave industrial memory into a living cultural bloodstream, breathing new life into it within a contemporary context.

The reconfiguration of stage space becomes a key pathway for the rebirth of industrial memory. In the new version of Red Flag, symbolic stage language reconstructs historical industrial scenes: the old workshop of the First Automobile Works is reimagined as a rotatable stage, its weathered wall textures recreated through dynamic lighting, and the clang of lathes transformed into choreographic rhythm. This artistic transmutation achieves value on three levels—historically, the production processes of the workshop are encoded into a visual industrial epic through corporeal choreography; generationally, the labor postures of veteran workers and the bodily expressions of contemporary dancers form a polyphonic narrative, enacting a spiritual relay across folded time and space; aesthetically, the collision between the rigid lines of industrial machinery and the supple dynamism of dance generates a visual poetics of tension and harmony.

This strategy of cultural activation is reshaping public engagement with industrial heritage. During the performance tour, the First Automobile Works site in Changchun saw a marked increase in young visitors, and dozens of handcrafted cultural products inspired by workshop workwear fabrics were developed. More profoundly, through the reinterpretation of bodily language and symbolic imagery, the work transforms industrial memory into an empathic cultural ritual: rusted dials become markers of time, faded production logs are elevated into collective epic, and silent factory columns rise to support a spiritual dome. This aesthetic enchantment not only preserves the genealogical code of industrial civilization but also, in an age dominated by instrumental rationality, safeguards a poetic and humanizing sanctuary of memory.

8. Conclusion

The successful creation and performance of Red Flag marks a significant breakthrough in the development of industrial-themed dance drama, offering valuable insights and opening new artistic frontiers across multiple dimensions.

Aesthetically, Red Flag pioneers a distinctive choreographic vocabulary of mechanical mimesis. By transforming the concept of bodily discipline into an expressive and emotionally resonant stage language, the production enables audiences to perceive the latent beauty of power, rhythm, and order inherent in industrial production. This innovation offers a novel paradigm for the artistic representation of industrial themes, facilitating a deep fusion of dance and industrial culture, and enriching the audience's aesthetic experience with newfound depth and complexity.

Emotionally, the work constructs a dynamic topology of feeling, skillfully integrating national narratives with individual experience. By grounding its grand historical vision in intimate emotional expression, Red Flag evokes profound empathy. The careful modulation between the sublime and the mundane enables the production to achieve a delicate emotional balance—one in which the monumental efforts of industrial development are imbued with the humanizing glow of personal stories, illuminating both the collective triumph and the individual resilience embedded within the industrial era.

Historically, the production offers a powerful retranslation of industrial memory through intergenerational bodily dialogue. The choreography vividly stages the transmission and evolution of industrial spirit from one generation to the next, thereby illuminating the continuity and lineage of China's industrial development. This approach to historical memory—creative, embodied, and affectively charged—encourages a renewed public consciousness of industrial legacy while also inspiring contemporary audiences to carry that legacy forward in a new era of national transformation.

These innovations not only provide a valuable new framework for industrial-themed artistic production but also reveal the underlying logic of contemporary Chinese cultural creation: amid rapid technological change, how might the narrative potential of the human body be harnessed to safeguard collective memory, process historical trauma, and evoke emotional resonance in works that faithfully reflect the spirit of the times?

Yet Red Flag also leaves us with urgent questions that invite deeper reflection. In an age where intelligent machinery increasingly replaces traditional assembly lines, and digital twin technologies reshape the landscape of production in unprecedented ways, how can dance continue to capture the emerging bodily experiences generated by a new wave of industrial revolution? How can choreography articulate the evolving relationship between humans and machines in the digital era? These are not only formidable challenges for choreographers, but also opportunities to push the boundaries of dance as a living art form.

Perhaps the answers lie in the bodies of those who still move alongside machines—workers who, through their daily labor, engage in a choreography of endurance and innovation. Their bodies bear the imprints of industrial history while also pointing toward the technological future. They are both the living archive of a vanishing industrial civilization and the embodied prophets of its next evolution. Looking ahead, we hope more artists will draw inspiration from these ordinary yet extraordinary bodies, crafting works that reflect the spirit of our time and resonate with lasting human significance. Through them, dance will continue to illuminate the path of industrial progress with brilliance and grace.

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