



From Shamanic Ritual to the Ritual-Music System: The Structural Evolution of Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance and Its Foundational Role in Later Martial Dance Forms

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Abstract

Background and Aims: This study investigates the historical evolution of Ganqi Dance, a prototypical form of Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance, and its structural transformation within the Chinese ritual-music system. By decoding its triadic structure of movement–instrument–space, the research aims to elucidate how this dance form transitioned from a shamanic martial rite into a formalized component of state rituals, and how it laid the foundation for subsequent martial-ritual practices in Chinese history.

Methodology: The research adopts a qualitative historical approach, integrating systematic literature review, textual criticism, and artifact/iconographic analysis. Key sources include oracle bone inscriptions, bronze ritual vessels, and canonical texts such as *The Book of Rites*, *Zhouli*, and *Yili*. Excavated artifacts like the Fangjia of Lady Fu Hao, bronze weapons with Ganqi motifs, and Eight Yi dance formations are analyzed to reconstruct the choreographic and symbolic logic of the Ganqi Phalanx.

Results: Findings reveal that the Ganqi Dance functioned as a political-religious performance uniting military authority and spiritual communication. The coordinated use of ritual weapons (Gan and Qi) and square spatial configurations mirrored cosmological principles and hierarchical state order. This triadic ritual structure was later codified into Confucian ceremonial forms, with enduring symbolic and institutional influence visible in the Da Wu dance, imperial ceremonies, and modern ritual revivals.

Conclusion: The Ganqi Dance represents a foundational model in Chinese ritual-military choreography, integrating somatic technique, cosmological space, and ritual objects into a unified ceremonial expression. Its structural logic exemplifies the translation of shamanic ritual into codified state ideology. This study contributes a new interpretive framework for analyzing ancient dance as a complex embodiment of political, religious, and aesthetic functions. Future research should explore digital reconstructions and comparative studies with other East Asian ritual martial traditions.





Keywords: Ganqi Dance; Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance; Ritual-Music System; Movement-Instrument-Space; Confucian Ceremony; Ritual-Military Performance

Introduction

Ritual implements such as Ganqi and jade axes unearthed from the Tomb of Lady Fu Hao at the Yinxu site reveal that in grand state rituals of the Shang dynasty, dancers wielded these instruments to pray and demonstrate military power. This reflects a political-religious system that simultaneously utilized martial and shamanic elements (Henan Museum, 2012A). The Book of Rites (Liji · Jitong) from the Western Zhou period records, “The lord holds the Ganqi and takes the position to dance,” emphasizing the monarch’s performance in the heavenly ritual to convey divine authority. This encodes a triadic relationship of “divinity-sovereignty-military” into the phalanx of the Ganqi Dance (Li et al., 2004; Wang, 2022). In Zhouli and Yili, the Ganqi Martial Dance is incorporated into the Eight Yi musical system, achieving the state institutional translation of earlier shamanic rites. The oracle inscriptions show “dance” and “military commander” listed side by side, indicating that martial dance had become part of the military oath-taking system, merging “military ritual” and “divine ritual” into an embodied practice (Chen et al, 2021). By the Song Dynasty, the Ganqi Dance was transformed once more into the “Confucian Sacrificial Dance” (Shidian Yiwuli), representing a secondary institutional shift from shamanic elements to pure ritual. In 2006, the Qufu Confucius Memorial Ceremony (2017) was designated as national intangible cultural heritage, with its martial dance still following the structure of the Da Wu, thus serving as a living continuation of a three-thousand-year ritual form. Bronze vessels with Ganqi motifs and phalanx-related archaeological remains in Zhouyuan further confirm the “Nine-grid-Eight Yi-Ganqi” spatial structure, offering key physical evidence for this study’s analysis of the Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance through the triadic structure of “movement-instrument-space.”

To address the lack of structural analysis in existing research on Ganqi Dance, this study focuses on the core question: how does the triadic structure of movement, instrument, and space reflect the ritual, military, and cosmological meanings embedded in early Chinese ceremonial systems? While previous studies have explored ritual texts, artifacts, or dance forms separately, few have integrated these elements into a unified analytical model. This study fills that gap by using a ritual structural framework to examine how shamanic martial dances were transformed into formal state ceremonies. Its significance lies in offering a new perspective for understanding ancient Chinese ritual-military aesthetics, supporting cultural heritage studies, and providing a theoretical basis for future reconstructions of intangible cultural heritage through interdisciplinary research.





Research Objectives

This study establishes the following three research objectives:

1. To analyze the triadic structure of “movement–instrument–space” in the Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance and reveal its symbolic meaning.
2. To reconstruct the material and textual lineage of the “Ganqi Phalanx” and clarify its structural positioning within the Eight Yi ritual system.
3. To explain its foundational role in the form and function of later martial dances and trace the evolution of the concept of “unity of ritual and mortality.”

Literature Review

To clarify the research trajectory from shamanic to ritual contexts in Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance, this paper classifies existing scholarship into five categories and identifies their limitations:

Religious–Shamanic Perspective

Early research emphasized the shamanic function of martial dance in sacrificial rites and war invocations. Tan (2019), using historical anthropology, highlighted the dual roles of martial dance in divine worship and military oath-taking, yet did not delve into structural mechanisms or institutional translation processes.

Ritual-Music System and Philological Perspective

Studies in institutional history often begin with the notion of “creating rites and music.” Guo (2015) examined how the Duke of Zhou incorporated martial dance into the ritual-music system, though he focused mainly on classical texts and lacked a detailed analysis of movement and spatial forms. Li (2018), analyzing the He Zun inscription on “moving residence,” revealed the logic behind constructing ritual spatial order, but did not extend into the coordination of movement and music.

Dance Form and Somatic Technique Studies

Li et al. (2004) proposed a triadic analysis of “movement posture–instrument–rhythm,” outlining the military symbolic characteristics of the Ganqi Dance. However, such studies generally remain at the movement level without situating the dance within religious and political systems.

Archaeological Artifacts and Iconographic Studies

Archaeological findings provide direct clues. Ritual vessels such as the Fangjia of Fu Hao and jade weapons with decorative patterns reveal symbolic logic between artifacts and movement (Henan Museum, 2012B), yet require integrated research with somatic techniques and ritual literature.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Transmission Studies

Contemporary ICH studies focus on the “ritual revival” of the Ganqi Dance in Confucius memorial ceremonies (2017), though they often stop at Confucian values, neglecting its shamanic roots and military symbolism. Meanwhile, UNESCO’s recognition of Thailand’s Khon masked dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage opens opportunities for cross-cultural comparison, though related research remains in its infancy.

In sum, while existing literature has made advances, it generally fails to integrate the triadic structure of “movement–instrument–space” or to fully reveal its dynamic translation across ritual, politics, and aesthetics. This study intends to address this gap using a “ritual structural migration” framework.

Research Methodology

This study adopts qualitative historical analysis to construct a dual evidence chain of “text and artifact,” employing the following methods:

Systematic Literature Review

This method systematically organizes oracle bones, bronze inscriptions, Liji, Yili, and other classics, along with research findings from the past two decades in religion, ritual studies, dance studies, and archaeology. It summarizes the diverse disciplinary perspectives on the origin, ritual-music transformation, and morphological evolution of Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance, providing support for problem formulation and framework construction.

Historical Philology and Textual Criticism

Using philological and comparative classical studies methods, this study closely reads and cross-verifies terms such as “Gan,” “Qi,” and “Yi,” as well as ritual provisions, with a focus on the institutional correlation between the He Zun inscription, oracle bone inscriptions, and ritual texts. It aims to reconstruct key nodes and semantic shifts in the Ganqi Dance’s transition from shamanic ritual to ritual-music institutionalization.

Iconographic and Artifact Analysis

This method selects objects such as the Fangjia of Fu Hao, Gui vessels with Ganqi motifs, and phalanx-configured bronze musical instruments. By analyzing their excavation context, morphological combinations, and decorative narratives, the study interprets the symbolic mapping between dance props and movement. Comparing artifact structure with choreographic dynamics, the research reconstructs a paradigmatic model of the Ganqi Dance across the triadic dimensions of “movement–instrument–space,” while cross-verifying with textual sources to establish its prototypical function.



Results

Movement-Instrument Duality

The Gan and Qi were not merely ritualistic or theatrical accessories. The instruments played by Ganqi dancers were potent symbols; extensions of spiritual or martial power. They were perceived as the embodiment of ancestral spirits, deities, or royal edicts. Dancers wielded the Gan and Qi in precise, often repetitive, choreographed movements, with each motion reinforcing the sanctity and power of both the instruments and their wielders. This dual role as instruments of action and symbols of deeper significance created a performative language that blended physicality with spiritual invocation.

Phalanx-Spatial Alignment

The spatial arrangement of the dancers was deliberate and symbolically charged. Dancers were often arrayed in formations resembling military phalanxes, which emphasized unity, order, and control. These formations could be based on systems like the “Eight Yi,” reflecting directions, elements, and natural forces. The dance became a ritualized map of the cosmos, with each step and formation reinforcing the harmony between heaven, earth, and human society. The spatial layout and formation were as much a part of the performance as the dance itself, communicating messages of royal legitimacy and cosmic authority.

Symbolic-Functional Integration

The Ganqi Dance also had a functional aspect beyond mere symbolic representation. It served as a ritual of exorcism, martial display, and moral instruction within early society. The dance was a means of banishing malevolent forces, displaying martial readiness and discipline, and instilling moral and social values through embodied practice. Over time, the dance evolved from a shamanic ritual to a formal state ceremony, mirroring the centralization of power and the shift from spiritual to political performance. This fusion of form and function in early Chinese ritual-dance practices is a powerful illustration of how early rulers harnessed the medium of dance for governance and ideological expression.

Bronze Inscriptions and Vessel Imagery as Evidence

The archaeological record provides further evidence for the centrality and format of the Ganqi Dance in early Chinese ritual-military culture. Bronze vessels from the period often bear inscriptions and iconographic depictions of ritual dances. Images on these vessels frequently show figures in formation, brandishing weapons, which aligns with textual descriptions of the Ganqi Dance. These artifacts offer both textual and visual corroboration of the dance’s format, embedded meanings, and ceremonial uses, validating the descriptions and interpretations of the ritual-dance practices found in early Chinese texts.





Discussion

Firstly, this research proposes that the Ganqi Dance is representative of a foundational model of ritual-martial performance in early Chinese society. By challenging previous scholarship that disassociated and categorized the use of ritual, military, and dance independently (Zhang 2003; Liu 2010), the primary contribution of this study is its cross-comparison of various aspects of the Ganqi system of movement (dong), instrument (qi), and spatial (chang) arrangement. As such, this study presents an understanding of how embodied movement, symbolic armaments, and spatial organization worked as a comprehensive system of expressing a particular order (in terms of both ideological values and cosmological beliefs). In other words, while the traditional understanding of the Ganqi Dance as a ritual form has been well-established in scholarship, this study underlines how it should be read as a performative enactment of ritual logic and, to an extent, statecraft.

Additionally, this study demonstrates that the formal and symbolic logic of Ganqi was applied and adapted to various forms in later historical periods. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Da Wu (“Great Dance”) of the Zhou period shares many ritual-martial similarities with Ganqi, such as the function of the head and tail divisions, processional direction, and spatial orientation (Wang 2015). Ritual-martial displays and military parades of the Qin and Han can be traced as further historical iterations of Ganqi, along with the sword dances (jian wu) of Tang dynasty China, and more modern 20th/21st century military displays and nationalistic choreography (Chen 2018; Li 2020). In all cases, the use of various choreographed forms and performance styles can be seen as an attempt at either reviving, referencing, or stylizing the form and function of Ganqi ritual dance in a manner that expresses the contemporary state or political group.

The methodological strength of this study can be highlighted by its cross-media examination of the various sources that attempt to reconstruct the performative logic of the ritual dance. The inscriptions on ritual bronzes of this period, for instance, are used as a textual source that can be triangulated with the visual, iconographic, and performative sources seen on ritual vessels, stone relief carvings, and other extant works. This approach helps to overcome the limitation of predominantly textual sources, which are often not sufficiently detailed in terms of movement or staging information (Lee 2009). As such, by cross-referencing the available textual, visual, and spatial sources, this study works as a more embodied approach to the reconstruction of ancient ritual movement.

In a similar vein, the Ganqi Phalanx system, which this study refers to, works as a model of state ritual in early Chinese society, which remained durable over an extended historical period. Despite changes to dynasty and ideology, as well as regional differences between the various





states in the Eastern Zhou, the same basic logic of ritual movement (aligned formations, special weapons, and spatial orientation) continued to be used in a wide variety of ritual forms and situations. As such, whether in an imperial court setting, regional exorcism, military performance, or later theatrical display, the use of the Ganqi formation as a ritual grammar can be seen to have encoded and expressed similar values related to the cosmology and power of the state (Sun 2017). This suggests not only that the Ganqi Dance was used as a religious or ritual performance, but that it was also a tool of statecraft, or in other words, a form of political aesthetics.

The aesthetic and ideological dimensions of the Ganqi Dance also point to its role as a ritual archetype and as a symbolic performance of state power. The sense of order, alignment, and ritual weaponry in the Ganqi movement can be seen as a metaphor for the power and values of the state and its rulers, including hierarchy and sacred order. In that way, such movement worked as both an enactment and reaffirmation of the state's power and value system for both elite and popular groups. Therefore, as previous scholarship on the performance of power has shown, ritual movement and aesthetics in early Chinese society worked as both expressive and constitutive (Bell 1992; Schechner 2002).

In summary, this study can be read as a new reading of the Ganqi Dance and other ritual-martial forms in early Chinese society in terms of ritual and political systems. By examining the available sources in a cross-disciplinary, methodological fashion, as well as taking a continuity-based approach to the Ganqi system and its historical applications, this research serves as a contribution to our understanding of ritual as a performative and embodied system that was embedded within the historical matrix of early Chinese statecraft, religious cosmology, and military display. In further research, other ritual or dance systems with a similar historical pattern of development can be analyzed through this study's model.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Shamanic Ritual Martial Dance embodied a complete structural system based on human-artifact-space interaction, serving multiple functions including exorcism, martial display, and royal indoctrination.

The ritualization of the Ganqi Dance was achieved through structural reinterpretation, as evidenced in the Western Zhou's institutional incorporation and Qin-Han formalization of military-ritual choreography.

The Ganqi Phalanx became a formal and symbolic template for subsequent martial dances across historical periods, confirming its enduring influence on Chinese ritual and performance traditions.





Future research should consider applying digital twin technology to simulate and visualize ancient dance forms and pursue comparative studies with other East Asian martial dances to better understand the global relevance of ritual-martial choreography as an intangible cultural heritage asset.

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