

# CONSTRUCTING IMAGES OF THE UNDERCLASS IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE CREATION FROM A LINGNAN PERSPECTIVE: TAKE THE DANCE WORK "TIME IN THE HANDSHAKE BUILDING" AS AN EXAMPLE

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**Abstract:** Contemporary dance is a form of dance creation that emerges from drawing materials and artistic processing of The Times. It can truly reflect social reality and has the characteristic of keeping pace with The Times. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has been constantly promoting the process of urbanization, which has brought about earth-shaking changes in the social environment over the past few decades, providing rich themes and inspirations for the creation of contemporary dance. The dance work "Time in the Handshake Building" takes the unique architectural type of the Lingnan region, the "Handshake Building", as its creative starting point. Through the organic combination of stage design, body movements and spatial choreography, it uses methods such as dance text analysis, image observation and cultural context analysis to illustrate the empirical evidence in the dance work. Starting from the urban environment of Lingnan, it depicts the life microcosm of the underclass groups living there. In the article, examples are given respectively through restrictive action design, the presentation of the relationship between the group and the individual, the arrangement and space, the handling of composition, and the symbolic function of stage props, to show the survival struggle of the underclass in the city while praising the kind undertone in human nature. In the creation of the dance work, the focus is placed on the living conditions of the underclass people, shifting from the real living space to the abstract images on the stage. This reflects the contemporary dance's concern for social reality and is positioned in the regional features of Lingnan, demonstrating the artistic value of local creation.

**Keywords:** Lingnan region; Contemporary dance; Images of the Underclass; Handshake building

## Introduction

When choreographers are creating contemporary dance works, they often focus on real events happening around them and seek out materials that can inspire them. Under such circumstances, the dance works created are often the microscopic world in the eyes of the choreographers. China boasts numerous noteworthy contemporary dance works, such as the dance drama "Eternal Radio Waves," depicting the resistance war, and the dance piece "Waiting," portraying a soldier's wife awaiting her husband's return. Grounded in reality, these dance works possess profound emotional depth and deeply moving power. The author's original dance work, "Time in the Handshake Building," is based on the unique architecture of the Lingnan region, the Handshake Building. Essentially, it is a concern for the living conditions of the residents living in such an environment.

Against the backdrop of the rapid expansion of urbanization in China, first-tier cities such as Guangdong and Shenzhen have risen rapidly, advancing urban construction at a high speed. At this juncture, a great demand for labor has emerged, attracting many people from

surrounding cities to work south in a short period of time. The continuous injection of energy has enabled the cities to constantly take on new looks. At the same time, it has also given rise to new social problems, namely the contradiction between the short-term overload of the labor force and the limited housing resources. Under such a realistic problem, the "handshake building" came into being. The "handshake building", also known as the "urban village", essentially reduces the cost of renting by compressing the living environment, greatly alleviating the housing shortage of the migrant population. At the same time, it also reflects the crowded and difficult living situation of thousands of low-income residents. The dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" takes the spatial form of the "Handshake Building" as its core. Through the comprehensive application of movement design, prop forms, and spatial arrangement, it presents the warm moments of neighborhood mutual assistance that the urban underclass can still show in the limited living space environment. This article takes this dance work as an example and, from the perspective of the Lingnan region, explores the construction methods of the underlying imagery and its artistic expression value in contemporary dance creation.

### Methodology

Dance text analysis method: The author has written and summarized the material selection, title determination and creative ideas of the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*", analyzed its movement design, character relationships, spatial arrangement and prop usage, and discussed the dual underlying imagery from the perspective of the Lingnan region.

Image contemplation method: By combining dance video materials, key clips are repeatedly observed and analyzed to extract the characteristics of pictorial expression.

Cultural context analysis: Against the backdrop of Lingnan's urban development and social structure, this method compares the actual spatial form of "handshake building" with their symbolic representation in the dance work to interpret the connotations of their metaphorical images.

### Result

-In dance creation, through various theatrical formats and movement designs, a dual popular image of "handshake building" and their residents is constructed, reflecting the authentic social landscape of the Lingnan region. The highly compressed theatrical space symbolizes the high-density living environment in the city. Constrained by their limited movement space, the dancers present the living conditions of the popular residents in reality through multiple dimensions: dance movements, character relationships (individual-group), and rhythmic treatment.

-Through changing light and shadow and stage direction, "*Time in the Handshake Building*" embodies the passage of time, fully depicting the flow from dawn to dusk, this "time" is accumulation of countless days and nights. Reality forces us to meet here and spend days that seem ordinary, but it is precisely in this ordinariness that the hidden and profound power of life lies. The interaction between individuals and the group reflects practical survival strategies under the pressures of urban life and a subtle interpretation of the Chinese proverb "A close neighbor is better than a distant relative", the light of humanity always shines through the harshness of reality.

## 1 The emergence of the urban context of Lingnan and the images behind it

### 1.1 The urban spatial characteristics of handshake building

Handshake building (academically referred to as "urban villages") are mainly concentrated in Chinese south cities, such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, it is a component of the Lingnan region. Over the past century, the rapid expansion of these cities has attracted a large number of migrant workers from surrounding cities, leading to the emergence of this type of symbolic housing (Picture 1). The distinctive feature of these building is the small gaps between them. Residents standing at their windows can reach out and touch their neighbors on the opposite side, hence the name. Researcher Yang Kaiyi observes: "Urban villages represent a temporary equilibrium achieved through multifaceted negotiations of interests and rational considerations within the current institutional framework in China... The contiguous building in these villages meet the housing needs of low-income tenants while addressing the structural imbalance in the insufficient supply of low- to medium-cost housing in the urban housing system, thereby alleviating the contradiction between supply and demand in urban housing."(Yang, 2024) As a product of the rapid urban development, the handshake building reflects the reality of tight land resources and highly concentrated population. While alleviating some of the pressure, it also reveals the contradiction between urban spatial planning and the demands of ground-floor residents.

The spatial structure of the Handshake building features distinct characteristics such as "high density", "low visibility", and "weak privacy". The tight and narrow living space is similar to the "card room" in Japanese architecture (Picture 2), revealing the similar predicament of "every inch of land is precious" faced by both places. The indoor area of building like Handshake building is tight and narrow, and the public areas are greatly compressed. Even on sunny days, only a single beam of light can reach the building. The prolonged lack of light has kept the residents in a state of emotional depression all year round. Building that are too close to each other lead to restricted ventilation and blurred boundaries between indoors and outdoors. The poor sound insulation of low-cost houses reduces the quality of life. Moreover, the overly close distance forces residents' daily behaviors to be exposed within the sight of others, and their privacy cannot be guaranteed. This overlapping and interwoven spatial relationship breaks the boundary between the "private domain" and the "public domain" in the general living environment, forming a living situation that has long been in a state of being watched and disturbed.



Picture 1: "Handshake Building" in China



Picture 2: "Card Room" in Japan

In the sense of urban space, the handshake building is not entirely a product of modern urban planning, nor is it an evolution of the traditional community form. Instead, it exists as a

"crevice" space between the two. It is often located in the core urban area of the city, catering to the housing needs of a large number of migrants. However, due to its not-so-decent image, it is on the periphery of the mainstream architectural narrative of the city. This "neglected space" state has gradually made the Handshake Building a symbol of the gathering of the city's underclass groups, marking a clear social class positioning on this spatial form.

Based on this, the Handshake building is not merely a simple architectural type, but is regarded as a highly symbolized urban spatial image. What it presents is not a grand urban landscape, but rather a compressed, obscured and superimposed scene of daily life. In contemporary dance creation, such spatial features have extremely strong potential for development. In the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*", a cubic space is constructed with props, and the actors are framed within it, reflecting the closed and cramped feeling of the handshake building. Within the limited space, the collision, overlap and crowding of the actors' movements and arrangements are designed to express "struggle", simulating the difficult breathing of humans in a high-density living environment. In this way, the urban living environment represented by the Handshake Building is intuitively reflected.

## 1.2 The Popular Experience of Urban Life in Lingnan

Urban life in the Lingnan region, in the rapid development since the reform and opening up, has presented the characteristics of "high mobility" and "diversity". The influx of a large number of migrants has brought together people of different identities and social strata in the same area. However, beneath the facade of prosperity, the current living conditions of the underprivileged are often overlooked and gradually fade away in the grand narrative of urban development. The Handshake Building embodies precisely the real and concrete living conditions of this group in the city.

The grassroots experience of Lingnan cities is first reflected in a "highly daily" state of existence. For those living in handshake building, life is composed of a large number of repetitive daily behaviors: commuting to and from work, living in cramped spaces, and inevitable physical contact with others. This pace of life is not intense, but due to the narrow space, people have been in a state of suppression and consumption for a long time. In addition, in high-density urban Spaces, identities such as migrant workers and tenants make people lack a stable sense of belonging in the city. Although people are physically very close to each other, they maintain a psychological distance, forming a kind of social relationship that is "close but not intimate". This contradictory state constitutes a highly distinctive emotional expression in the underclass life of Lingnan cities.

In contemporary dance creation, compared with the narrative and dramatic descriptive techniques, the expression of emotions under such contradictions is more suitable to be presented through a lyrical creative and choreographic approach. In the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*", the dancers' movements often exhibit characteristics of restraint, restraint and repetition. It is precisely by abstracting this kind of life experience from the underclass and reinterpreting it through the form of dance. The distance between dancers frequently appears parallel, overlapping and brief contact, symbolizing the state in the handshake building where people share space but are also isolated from each other.

The grassroots experience of Lingnan cities also has a distinct temporal dimension. The word "time" in the title of this dance work does not merely refer to the concept of "time" in a general context, but rather an existence that is constantly eroded by ordinary life. The long-term repetitive life of a single mechanical device has gradually made people numb to the passage of time, like a screw on the production line in a factory. This is reflected in the dancer's body, presenting a delay in movement and a sluggishness in rhythm. This way of perceiving time is

precisely the common experience of the underclass groups in urban life.

By transforming the underlying experiences of urban life in Lingnan into body language on stage, "*Time in the Handshake Building*" has achieved a transition from social reality to artistic imagery. The dance work does not choose a narrative approach for expression but rather sketches out the underlying images with universal significance through the dancers' body movements. This image not only originates from the social reality of cities in the Lingnan region, but also acquires artistic value beyond specific Spaces through the expression methods of contemporary dance.

## **2 Methodology of constructing images of the lower class in "*Time in the Handshake Building*"**

### **2.1 Movement Design: Depicting Physical Conditions in High-Density Spaces**

The action design of the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" takes "physical limitations" as its core feature, restoring the high-density and low-freedom spatial form of the Handshake building. To express the physical habits and survival postures formed by being in a confined space for a long time, the dancers' movements mostly present the forms of "inward retraction", "close to the ground", and "avoidance", deliberately controlling the extent of the body's extension, and rarely showing expansive leaping or stretching movements. This kind of movement design actively abandons the display of technical capabilities and instead conveys the living conditions of the urban underclass in a limited space through the folding and compression of body forms.

In terms of the rhythm of movements, the dance work extensively employs repetitive action structures. The dancers repeatedly perform similar action elements such as pushing, squeezing, leaning and pausing, with the aim of restoring the living environment and squeezed living conditions of the underclass as accurately as possible, outlining the image of this specific group, making the dance work more realistic and convincing. Rather than pursuing the richness of movement variations, this repetitive creative technique leaves an impression on the audience through continuous accumulation of signature movements. As the dance work progresses, the audience gradually feels the erosion and consumption of time in their bodies until a sense of "boredom" emerges, thus achieving empathy between the dance work and the audience. Repetitive actions here also become a direct expression of the word "time" in the title, suggesting that the daily lives of the underclass people, trapped in the repetitive cycle of a monotonous tone under the slow passage of time, find it difficult to break through.

During the creative process, the choreographer closely adhered to the spatial characteristics of the handshake building and emphasized the "passivity" feature in the design of the movements. Dancers' bodies are often influenced by space or others rather than actively controlling the direction of their movements, and they have to perform actions similar to "avoidance" or "dodging", recreating the realistic predicament in a crowded space where people have to influence and disturb each other. This passive state intensifies the tension between the body and the environment, making the dancer seem to be constantly suppressed by space and disciplined by reality. Through the presentation of this physical state, the dance work transforms abstract social pressure into perceptible dance movements, thereby constructing underlying images with a realistic orientation.

### **2.2 Character Relationship Design: Individual Circumstances Within Collective Structures**

In terms of character relationship design, the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" takes a group dance structure as its main body and presents the collective survival

state of the underclass life in Lingnan cities through the constantly changing relationship between individuals and groups. In the early stage of the creative process, the choreographer attempted to use various methods to define the characters, such as delivery workers, office workers, and bricklaying workers, etc. By positioning the distinct and diverse characters, they could be recognized as a microcosm of the general public in the social environment of the Lingnan region. Although each has its own color, they are all "low-level" images. When creating the dance work, the choreographer chose to downplay individual differences and adopt a homogeneous arrangement, which corresponds to the reality that individual identities are dissolved in the high-density urban living environment. In the group dance section, the positions of the dancers frequently overlap, block and touch each other, making the compressed space of the "Handshake Building" more realistic. This closeness did not translate into emotional intimacy; instead, it became an impediment and disturbance. As the frequency increased, it tinged a faint sense of anxiety over the dance work. The dancers lack eye contact and their physical contact is mostly functional (such as lifting) or forced, symbolizing the relationship feature of "close physical distance but far psychological distance" between people in urban life.

Most of the time, each actor in this dance work is presenting the image of a working-class person at the bottom of society who is busy with their own lives. If it were only like this, the theme of the dance work would become dull and uninteresting. When the choreographer was conceiving the creative structure, she took an actress as the thread, appropriately presenting the anxious and restless state that emerged when facing life's difficulties, while other dancers would cast caring glances at her. This kind of plot design creates a clear contradiction: even if life is not easy and everyone is on their own, when seeing those around them in trouble, they are still willing to stop and offer a helping hand, which is an expression of the kind nature of human beings.(Picture 3).



Picture 3: *Time in the Handshake Building*

### 2.3 Spatial Arrangement: Division and Flow of the Theater Space

In *Time in the Handshake Building*, spatial arrangement is a crucial means of constructing the image of the ground floor environment. By dividing and restricting the stage space, the piece mimics the narrow, enclosed spatial structure that characterizes the Handshake Building. "Inside the building, apart from the relatively straight main road, the remaining paths intersect in a maze-like, uneven, and irregular manner. Occasionally, vehicles suddenly emerge from these paths, posing a significant danger to pedestrians. " (Yang, 2024) To restore the image of the path between building, the dancers' movement paths on the stage are mostly set along fixed areas, arranged in a linear pattern of "vertical lines" and "horizontal lines". This restrained and monotonous treatment approach gives the picture a depressing texture of "movable but

inescapable". During the choreographer's field research, they attempted to observe the road environment between building from different perspectives. While moving through the limited space, we often kept going around in circles in the corridors due to similar street scenes and weak lighting. Insufficient ventilation exacerbated our depressed emotions. Staying for a long time easily led to negative emotions such as "irritability and depression". Later, the choreographer projected this experience into the creation, manifesting it as a relatively stagnant flow on the stage, constantly cycling within a given range. This scheduling method further strengthened the dance work's expression of the "stagnant feeling" of urban underclass life.

The coordination of light and shadow also plays a significant role in the scheduling. To represent the form of "time", the choreographer uses warm yellow light and cool blue light to respectively represent day and night. Through the contrast of light and dark created by local lighting, the stage space is visually divided into multiple areas. The dancers perform in different light zones, creating an effect of "interweaving time and space". In the middle and later parts of the dance work, as dusk fell, everyone was still constantly on the go for their own livelihood, and a female dancer sat at the front of the stage, letting out a long sigh of exhaustion. Here, the dynamic choreography of the group dance contrasts with the static choreography of the solo dancers, supplemented by the switching of light and shade and warm and cool tones. This not only visually presents the concept of "time", but also highlights the characters' tired and depressed emotions, enhancing the emotional rendering, making the picture more closely related to reality, and generating an empathy between the viewers and the dance work.

#### **2.4 Props Design: Transition from Concrete Space to Symbolic Images**

The props in the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" are multiple cubic foam-made boxes, which are constructed in various ways to form different shapes. This figurative element is a highly abstract representation of the spatial form of the Handshake building (Picture 4). Props are not only a part of the stage space but also an important reference for the dancers' physical movements. The placement of props restricts the dancers' range of movement. The movements and arrangements within the confined space generate corresponding motivations, giving rise to action elements such as climbing, leaning, and walking. The dancers interact closely with the props, making the architectural space not just a background but a key factor influencing the dancers' behavioral motivations.

Props have a dual function in dance works. It defines the dancers' range of movement in specific forms, intensifying the sense of spatial oppression. Meanwhile, through continuous recombination and utilization, it has become a symbolic stage image. This transformation process from the concrete to the abstract makes props an important medium connecting the real space with artistic expression.

Through the repeated presentation of the relationship between props and the body, the dance work translates the real existence of the "Handshake Building" into a underclass image on the stage. Even if the audience is not familiar with the urban background, they can still sense a compressed, surrounded and time-eroded state of survival at the bottom through the relationship between the dancers and the props on the stage.



Picture 4: The props form the "Handshake building" shape

### 3 The realistic orientation of the dance work and artistic expression

#### 3.1 Practical considerations in the midst of urbanization

The creation of the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" takes "The Handshake Building" as the entry point, and essentially focuses on the neglected underclass groups in the context of the rapid development of the city. The dance work does not directly create based on poverty, conflict or dramatic events, but chooses to start from daily life. Through physical limitations, repetitive movements and the oppression of space, it presents a real, lasting and oppressive state of existence. And based on this pattern, it attempts to show the beautiful friendship of mutual assistance among people and praise the brilliance of human nature. This approach enables the dance work to avoid a superficial definition of the underclass life and instead present the real situation of the underclass group in their living environment in a relatively restrained way.

In the process of urbanization, time is often regarded as a symbol of progress and renewal. However, in the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*", time is presented as an existence that is consumed and bound. The dynamic performance and emotions of the dancers on the stage make "time" no longer point to the future but remain in a continuous state of the present, implicitly suggesting a negative attitude towards the "hopelessness" of the future. This handling of time profoundly responds to the real experiences of the underclass groups in urban life. They are often drawn into the rhythm of urban operation but find it difficult to truly share the fruits of urban development.

Furthermore, the dance work presents the widespread problem of identity ambiguity among the underclass groups in cities through the exist of group bodies and the brief appearance of individuals. The individual is hidden within the collective, not completely vanishing, but rather a state of existence that is hard to see and distinguish. The realistic orientation of the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" does not rely on explicit social criticism, but rather through the physical conditions of the dancers on the stage, it guides the audience to re-examine the hidden underlying situation behind urban development. This creative strategy of intervening in reality through dance endows the dance work with a strong social concern significance.

### 3.2 Artistic Value and Local Significance in Contemporary Dance Creation

From an artistic perspective, the dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" offers a practical path of reference value for how contemporary dance can be localized in creation. The dance work combines the creative ideas and practical methods of modern dance with the real situation of the Lingnan region, making dance serve specific cultural and social expressions. This creative orientation is conducive to promoting the continuous development of contemporary dance in the Chinese context.

In terms of image construction, the dance work achieves the transformation from real space to artistic image through the comprehensive application of stage installations, body movements and spatial scheduling. The concrete existence of the handshake building was not directly replicated on the stage, but was refined into a symbolic spatial structure, allowing the audience to feel the living conditions of the underclass people conveyed by the dance work without relying on specific background knowledge. This imagery treatment reflects the balance between abstract expression and realistic orientation in contemporary dance.

From the perspective of body language, the dance work constructs a rather unique way of body expression through restrained, reserved and repetitive movement designs. Different from the aesthetic of traditional dance, this kind of dance work does not pursue the display of techniques but emphasizes the function of the body as an "experience carrier", enabling dancers to become presenters of real-life experiences. This creative orientation helps to expand the possibilities of body expression in contemporary dance and also strengthens the function of dance as a medium of social expression. This dance work is created from the perspective of the Lingnan region, enabling contemporary dance to no longer remain at the level of abstract expression but to be rooted in the urban reality of specific regions. When we engage in artistic creation, we should pursue genuine responses, not merely providing positive feedback and expression. From a long-term perspective, through the artistic translation of the local situation and on-site experience, the dance work construct underlying images with regional characteristics, providing a sustainable development direction for the creative practice of contemporary Lingnan dance.

### Conclusion

The dance work "*Time in the Handshake Building*" takes the typical building "Handshake Building" in the Lingnan region as its core and, through the creative ideas of contemporary dance, completes the expression of the image of the city's lower strata. The dance work combines architectural space, action design and time narrative, making the underlying imagery no longer remain at the surface representation but become a stage expression with symbolic significance and emotional depth.

From the perspective of the Lingnan region, the dance work not only reflects the contemporary dance's response to the current living conditions of the underprivileged, but also demonstrates the possibility of dance art intervening in society and expressing reality. It provides beneficial inspiration for constructing dance works with regional characteristics and revealing the deep-rooted images of the underprivileged in society.

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