

The Choreographic Construction of the “Traumatized Collective” in *In the Depths of Memory*

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Abstract

In the Depths of Memory serves as an artistic commemoration of the Nanjing Massacre, one of the most catastrophic events in modern Chinese history. Through stylized theatrical expression, the choreographer constructs a multitude of symbolic stage images. Among these, the most prominent and thematically significant figures are the collective of those who suffered during the massacre. This group-transcending distinctions of profession, social status, and gender-shares a common experience of peril and anguish. The choreography of *In the Depths of Memory* dedicates multiple dance sequences to depicting this “traumatized collective.” From the perspective of movement composition, variations in physical motivation, modes of motion, and spatial dynamics collectively shape the representation of trauma on stage, thereby generating a richer aesthetic texture and a deeper emotional resonance.

Keywords

In the Depths of Memory; Trauma; Collective; Stage Movement.

1. Introduction

The term *trauma* originates from the ancient Greek word “τραῦμα”, meaning a physical wound inflicted upon the human body by external force. Prior to the sixteenth century, the term was used exclusively to denote bodily injury, later extending metaphorically to encompass psychic and emotional harm. In early trauma studies, researchers often conceptualized trauma as a state of being in which the body and mind are subjected to external violence. When this external referent is specified as the historical event of the Nanjing Massacre, *trauma* then refers to the direct and indirect psychological wounds sustained by all the individuals and collectives who suffered within it.[1] From 1937 to the present day, scholarly and artistic discourse on the psychic scars of the Nanjing Massacre has never ceased. The event has transcended historical boundaries to become one of the most painful and unforgettable traumatic motifs embedded in the collective memory of the Chinese people. Artistic responses-whether in literature, the visual arts, or music-inevitably return to the gaze and reflection upon trauma.[2]

Dance creation is no exception. The dance drama *In the Depths of Memory* stands as a compelling example. Viewed through the lens of the Chinese-American writer Iris Shun-Ru Chang, the choreographer reconstructs this tragic history through an artistic and reflective mode of expression. The work delves into the residual emotional responses that linger in the depths of collective memory after trauma-responses that resist direct visualization yet remain palpably real. Through the subtle articulation of bodily gesture and movement, the choreography constructs a corporeal understanding of trauma. Thus, to watch *In the Depths of Memory* is not merely to witness a representation of a historical event, but rather to engage with a kinetic reconstruction of psychological trauma through the expressive body.[3] On stage, the audience perceives pain through the body that performs it-an embodied, secondary interpretation of historical suffering through movement.

Within the historical context of the Nanjing Massacre, the “traumatized collective” refers to those who directly experienced it-both the deceased and the survivors-whose lives were indelibly marked by its devastation. On stage, this collective is embodied in ensemble sections that recall the victims through the retrospective perspective of Iris. Given the medium of dance, these collectives are represented as *moving* bodies; motion thus becomes the most immediate element through which their image is apprehended. Consequently, this paper takes *movement* as its central analytical focus, examining how the choreographic design of *In the Depths of Memory* constructs the stage image of the traumatized collective.

In the show, approximately five major dance sequences depict this collective image: the “Quartet Procession” in the first act, the “Ground Ensemble,” the “Circular Dance under Imminent Peril,” the “Dual Ground Formations,” and finally the concluding “Tableau of the Traumatized Collective.” These five choreographic moments form the core corpus of analysis for this study, which will proceed to explore the external, corporeal dimensions of movement through which the image of the traumatized collective is articulated on stage.[4]

2. Primary Kinetic Motives in the External Body Actions of the “Traumatized Collective”

The collective images on the stage of *In the Depths of Memory* are closely intertwined with emotions elicited by trauma-pain, resentment, despair, and the will to resist. The external bodily movements are marked by intense tension; when the trajectories of the limbs interact with the cutting of light and shadow on stage, a powerful sense of spatial consciousness emerges. Motivation constitutes the origin of choreographic action; an accurate and coherent motive gives rise to a dramatically expressive and emotionally resonant stage picture, enriching character construction and advancing narrative progression. In the shaping of the *traumatized collective*, motivation assumes heightened importance-not only as a vehicle of expression but also as an indicator of identity. The collective in *In the Depths of Memory* is not a mere fictional construct; it embodies a fragment of historical truth. Therefore, the formation of dance motivation requires both artistic creativity and ethical precision: it must balance imaginative expression with fidelity to historical perception. The following analysis will address several key regions of the body as sources of choreographic motivation.

2.1. Forward Bending and Reaching of the Arms

This simple yet recurrent arm motif appears throughout the ensemble sections, functioning alternately as a direct expression of emotional states or as a transitional link between movements, thereby establishing one of the central kinetic themes of the collective image. The gesture first occurs in the opening act, when Iris-portrayed by Tang Shiyi (the actress)-enters the “gate of memory” through writing, traversing into the historical temporality of the Nanjing Massacre. In this first tableau, titled *The Quartet Procession*, four figures emerge as the earliest embodiment of the “traumatized collective.” The scene contains minimal dance in the conventional sense-only measured walking-yet two of the performers’ arms bend and extend forward. The gesture divides the upper body’s spatial field into two parts, creating a visual sense of rupture. The forward-reaching motion signifies both the impulse to touch and the act of supplication, articulating through the body the collective’s questioning, evasion, despair, and doubt in the face of catastrophe.

This gesture directly corresponds to the psychological orientation of the traumatized collective. After a catastrophic event, the first stage of trauma processing is *hyperarousal*, in which individuals exhibit heightened sensory alertness and psychological tension. Some victims may lose bodily control or the ability to recall events. This is followed by the *resistance phase*, during which the organism mobilizes its entire defense system, displaying acute stress reactions-shock,

grief, and physical exhaustion. The forward bending and reaching of the arms precisely mirror this somatic manifestation of emergency response and emotional overstrain.[5]

Throughout the play, this movement recurs in numerous ensemble passages, expanding into layered choreographic variations that embody collective anguish and helplessness. For instance, in the sequence *Circular Dance under Imminent Peril*, dancers stand atop a circular platform, facing surrounding aggressors. Their heads tilt upward as their arms stretch forward and upward, overlapping and trembling in waves. The gesture signifies both unending fear and the final, desperate plea for hope—an image of reaching that never attains its object, expressing a collective without escape, suspended in futile yearning.

2.2. The Motive of Walking

The act of *walking* in the drama transcends its quotidian meaning, assuming instead a rich emotional and symbolic function. As a choreographic motive, it manifests in various forms—wandering, pacing, gliding—each shaping a distinct facet of the collective atmosphere. From the perspective of trauma theory, the helplessness, numbness, and despair conveyed through walking correspond to symptoms of *acute stress disorder*, wherein victims experience disorientation, restricted consciousness, and impaired perception in response to extreme psychological or physical shock.

At the beginning of the drama, two lines of dancers encircle the stage under the leadership of a principal performer. As the formation gradually closes into a circle, walking becomes the foundational motive from which all movement arises. The dancers' steps are heavy and dragging, their pacing labored against the slow, somber music. This movement transforms walking into an embodied confrontation between two lines and the spatial field of the stage itself. It expresses the internal rupture and muted outcry of the traumatized collective—an emotional amalgam of grief and despair that foreshadows the ensuing dramatic development, giving the collective body both density and emotional weight.

Extensive use of *walking* also appears in the latter half of the work. Under dim, amber lighting, a group of women clad in earth-toned dresses move slowly from upstage to downstage, one hand covering their mouths, the other hanging beside them. Each step is amplified, focusing the audience's gaze on the dancers' legs. The monotonous, prolonged *walking* expands the spectators' imaginative engagement with the pain of the collective. Within the darkened frame of the stage, this interminable walk becomes the embodiment of resignation and numbness—the first hesitant step marking both the recognition of endless suffering and the paralysis of those who can no longer resist.

2.3. The Outstretched-And-Twisting Arm Motif

The extension and torsion of the arms serve as a major kinetic motive for the release and transformation of emotion within the ensemble choreography. Subsequent combinations of this movement inherit its force, generating a dynamic contrast to the subdued tonal base of the work. In the Dual Ground Formations and in the later sequence featuring women in yellow gowns, this gesture becomes prominent. The movement is not static but sequential and continuous: the dancers extend their arms horizontally to both sides, then rapidly draw their legs together, bending one knee to the left while the arms follow in close synchrony. The torso opens, the arms accelerate with the legs, culminating in a tilted rotation. Though the rotation originates from the knees, the arms initiate the kinetic impulse. The coordinated interplay between the upper and lower body yields a powerful sense of momentum, occupying greater spatial range and rhythmic duration, thereby amplifying emotional intensity.

From this perspective, the gesture transcends sorrow, evolving into an expression of defiance and visceral anger. It elevates the collective's emotional tone from lamentation to protest—from despair to an embodied cry for justice. Through this spiraling, twisting gesture, the

choreographer endows the traumatized collective with a corporeal force that resists annihilation: a movement born of despair yet imbued with indomitable vitality[6].

3. Kinetic Rhythms of the “Traumatized Collective”

Following the discussion of *movement motives*, the rhythmic modalities of motion constitute another crucial dimension in constructing the image of the “traumatized collective” in *In the Depths of Memory*. Distinct rhythmic patterns give rise to markedly different expressions of movement, thereby shaping emotional tonality and influencing the representational mode of the collective figures on stage. This section identifies and analyzes the representative rhythmic modalities employed in the depiction of the traumatized collective, in an attempt to elucidate how rhythm contributes to the formation of abstract group imagery within the choreography [7].

3.1. Contraction

Contraction serves as the core rhythmic motif in the movement design of the traumatized collective throughout the production. It recurs in multiple scenes, functioning not merely as a local physical oscillation but as a gesture that originates from breath itself. Rapid respiration gives rise to sharp, convulsive contractions, while slower breathing evokes deeper, more meditative compressions. The interplay between acceleration and deceleration generates a dynamic, expressive contraction of the upper body. The dancers employ their torsos extensively in this mode-movements radiate from the neck and shoulders through the arms, waist, and abdomen, alternating between forward and backward contractions in both synchronous and opposing sequences.

The opening scene, *Two Lines of Floor Dance*, exemplifies this mode: dancers press close to the ground, mouths agape in labored breathing, producing spasmodic chest tremors that suggest the agony of near-suffocation. Within this rhythmic schema, crawling, rising, and shoulder rotations all embody variations of contraction. Later, in the *Circle Dance*, contraction becomes interwoven with other motion structures, functioning as the connective tissue between phrases. Here, contraction not only expresses inner terror but also constitutes a somatic response to external menace, rendering visible the collective’s confrontation with fear and violence [8].

3.2. Repetition

Repetition is another significant rhythmic modality in the play. It manifests as the reiteration of specific body parts’ actions or the recurrence of identical movement motives. Across numerous scenes, dancers-sometimes linked hand in hand, sometimes isolated-repeatedly stamp their feet, bend and rise, shake their heads, or pace incessantly. These repetitions not only intensify the emotional atmosphere but also invoke the pathological dimension of collective trauma-namely, the Freudian notion of *compulsive repetition*. First articulated by Freud, this concept describes how individuals or groups re-enact distressing experiences following exposure to catastrophic events. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud observed that when the protective psychic barrier is breached by trauma, the subject experiences involuntary repetitions of the traumatic memory, producing neurosis. In choreographic terms, such compulsion is externalized through movement. The choreographer translates the pathology of repetition into a symbolic and stylized artistic language, transforming psychological compulsion into visible, embodied reiteration. Thus, the act of repetition becomes both a gesture of remembrance and a symptom of trauma, binding corporeal form to psychic pain.

4. Spatial Distribution of Movement in the Representation of the “Traumatized Collective”

The spatial organization of movement further contributes to the construction of the traumatized collective’s image. From the spectator’s perspective, the dancers’ spatial awareness largely determines the expressive character and aesthetic style of the choreographic image. In the drama, spatial composition centers primarily on low-floor levels and elevated fixed platforms, evident in sequences such as Quartet Procession, Ground Ensemble, Circular Dance under Imminent Peril, Dual Ground Formations and the concluding Tableau of the Traumatized Collective.

4.1. The First Space: The Floor

The floor is one of the most conspicuous and dominant spatial levels in the performance, serving as the principal locus for the collective imagery. Two pivotal scenes that drive the narrative take place entirely on the ground. For the traumatized collective, the floor embodies a space of passive endurance. The overwhelming weight of suffering renders vertical or expansive movement impossible; thus, the dancers’ descent and adherence to the ground most effectively convey despair and hopelessness. Gravity, as the primary element of the floor space, imposes a downward pull on every gesture. This sense of descent encapsulates the physical manifestation of emotional collapse-the falling body becomes an emblem of inescapable despair [9].

4.2. The Fixed “Third Space”

The “third space” refers to the aerial dimension of motion-the vertical zone of leaps, suspensions, and fixed elevations. But in the show, this space materializes not only through physical jumping but also via the sustained occupation of elevated platforms, creating stratified spatial layers. In sequences such as the Danger Circle Dance and The Tableau of the Traumatized Collective, dancers remain confined to a central high platform. This elevated confinement conveys both isolation and exposure: the group appears besieged; the stage environment charged with threat and instability. Such precarious positioning mirrors the collective’s psychological disorientation and helplessness amid trauma [10]. And in the concluding tableau, elevation becomes symbolic. The high platform transforms into a site of commemorative display, heightening the emotional climax and infusing the final image with solemnity and grandeur. Through spatial contrast, the choreography materializes the collective’s anguish and defiance in the face of annihilation.

5. Conclusion

In the Depths of Memory excavates the deepest strata of human emotion, translating the psychological states of the traumatized into choreographic form. The choreographer distills the inner tension of the trauma survivor into psychophysical gestures, from which emerge varied layers of movement motives, rhythmic modalities, and spatial configurations. In doing so, the production transforms the historical reality of collective trauma into a poetic embodiment of memory on stage [9]. Grounded in historical truth, the choreographic imagery-especially that of the collective-acquires profound expressive power. Through movement, audiences are drawn into the immediacy of bodily presence; through authenticity, they partake in the remembrance of suffering. Ultimately, *In the Depths of Memory* becomes not only a reenactment but also a ritual of mourning and reverence, inscribed within the shared memory of pain [10].

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