

WEN–WU DUALITY AND EMBODIED PERFORMANCE IN CANGZHOU LUOZI DANCE

SHUTING LI & NURULAKMAL BINTI ABDUL WAHID*

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim 35900, Malaysia

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2026.7421>

ABSTRACT

Cangzhou Luozi Dance is a representative folk dance tradition from Hebei Province, China, in which the paired forms of Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi embody a distinctive civil–martial cultural logic. Existing studies have mainly focused on historical documentation, regional classification, and heritage preservation, while less attention has been paid to how Wen–Wu meanings are constructed through embodied performance. Drawing on ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, audio-visual documentation, and archival materials, this study examines how Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are symbolically and performatively constructed within Cangzhou Luozi Dance. The findings show that Wen Luozi communicates civility, refinement, restraint, and composure through moderated tempo, curved pathways, fan manipulation, eye–hand coordination, and controlled movement. By contrast, Wu Luozi expresses martial courage, vitality, discipline, and collective force through acrobatic movement, forceful stepping, weapon handling, intensified percussion, and expanded spatial projection. The study argues that Wen and Wu are not fixed oppositional categories, but relational and complementary performance structures. Through movement, rhythm, props, costume, and space, Cangzhou Luozi Dance transforms civil and martial values into an embodied symbolic system.

Keywords: Cangzhou Luozi Dance; Wen–Wu duality; embodied performance; Chinese folk dance; cultural semiotics; performance studies

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cangzhou Luozi Dance is a representative form of northern Chinese folk dance rooted in Hebei Province, particularly in Nanpi County under the jurisdiction of Cangzhou. Shaped by regional ecology, historical experience, communal festivals, martial traditions, and local cultural practice, it has developed as both an artistic form and a cultural medium through which collective memory, regional identity, and local values are sustained. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, Cangzhou Luozi Dance embodies a complex relationship between movement, rhythm, symbolic expression, and communal participation.

A distinctive feature of Cangzhou Luozi Dance is the paired structure of Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi. This relationship reflects the broader Chinese cultural framework of Wen and Wu, commonly understood as the dynamic balance between civil cultivation and martial discipline. Wen Luozi generally emphasises restraint, coordination, vocal expression, rhythmic subtlety, and controlled movement, while Wu Luozi incorporates more vigorous movement patterns, acrobatic techniques, martial-influenced actions, and the use of props. Together, these two forms demonstrate how civil and martial values are not simply opposed, but embodied, negotiated, and integrated within performance practice.

Existing studies on Cangzhou Luozi Dance have contributed to historical documentation, folklore classification, regional cultural description, and performance preservation. However, relatively limited attention has been paid to the internal relationship between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi as an integrated symbolic and embodied performance system. In particular, the ways in which movement vocabulary, gesture, rhythm, props, costume, spatial organisation, and performative interaction construct and communicate Wen–Wu meanings remain insufficiently examined. This gap is significant because folk dance does not transmit cultural meaning only through verbal narrative or historical memory; it also communicates through embodied action, movement quality, bodily discipline, rhythmic organisation, and visual performance structure.

From a culturological and performance-based perspective, dance can be understood as an embodied cultural practice through which values, identity, historical consciousness, and social meanings are performed and transmitted. In the case of Cangzhou Luozi Dance, the relationship between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi provides a valuable case for examining how civil and martial values are made visible through the body. The dance therefore offers insight into how traditional Chinese cultural concepts are not only represented symbolically, but also enacted through coordinated movement, performative contrast, and embodied interaction.

This article focuses on the embodied construction of Wen–Wu duality in Cangzhou Luozi Dance. It examines how Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are distinguished through movement vocabulary and performative structure, and how their interaction produces a broader aesthetic and cultural logic within the dance. By analysing the symbolic and embodied relationship between these two forms, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of Chinese folk dance as a living performance system in which cultural meaning is produced through bodily practice, rhythm, spatial organisation, and performative coordination.

Accordingly, this article addresses two main questions: first, how are Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi symbolically and performatively constructed within Cangzhou Luozi Dance? Second, how are civil and martial values embodied through movement vocabulary, props, rhythm, and spatial organisation? By answering these questions, the article seeks to clarify the significance of Wen–Wu duality as both a cultural framework and an embodied performance structure within Cangzhou Luozi Dance.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese folk dance traditions have historically developed from collective rural life, ritual practice, seasonal festivals, local belief systems, and community-based social organisation. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, folk dance has increasingly been understood as an embodied cultural practice through which collective memory, regional identity, social values, and symbolic meanings are reproduced and transmitted across generations (Hanna, 1987; Kaeppler, 1978; Royce, 2002; Sklar, 2001). Within this broader context, Cangzhou Luozi Dance represents a regional folk performance tradition shaped by the historical, ecological, and communal conditions of southeastern Hebei Province.

The historical formation of Cangzhou Luozi Dance is closely connected to the cultural environment of Nanpi County and the wider Cangzhou region. Existing accounts generally trace the early development of Luozi performance to the Qing Dynasty, particularly from the Yongzheng reign onward, when early forms appeared as rap-based folk performances

accompanied by percussion and basic bodily gestures (Li & Abdul Wahid, 2025). During the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns, Luozi gradually spread within Nanpi County and surrounding areas, integrating singing, rhythmic movement, stylised gesture, costume, percussion, and performative interaction into a more coherent folk performance system. Its development was shaped by temple fairs, seasonal celebrations, village gatherings, folk singing traditions, and local martial culture.

One of the important cultural sources of Luozi Dance is Lianhua Luo, a traditional narrative singing form characterised by rhythmic recitation, improvisational dialogue, and audience interaction. Through long-term adaptation in rural communities, this narrative tradition gradually interacted with bodily movement, rhythm, and theatrical gesture, contributing to the formation of Luozi as a more comprehensive performance practice. Regional opera, festival performance, percussion traditions, and martial cultural practices also influenced the development of Luozi Dance. As a result, the dance became a hybrid folk performance form that combines song, rhythm, gesture, props, movement, and communal participation.

A distinctive feature of Cangzhou Luozi Dance is the differentiation between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi. This distinction reflects the broader Chinese cultural framework of Wen and Wu, commonly associated with civil cultivation and martial discipline. In Luozi Dance, Wen Luozi is generally characterised by restrained movement, measured rhythm, lyrical expression, fan manipulation, and controlled bodily coordination. By contrast, Wu Luozi is associated with vigorous stepping, martial-influenced movement, acrobatic techniques, dynamic prop use, and intensified rhythmic projection. Existing studies have often described these differences as stylistic or aesthetic contrasts, but relatively little attention has been given to how Wen and Wu operate as an integrated symbolic and embodied system within performance.

Embodiment theory provides an important perspective for addressing this limitation. Scholars of embodiment argue that bodily movement is not merely physical action but a culturally shaped mode of knowing, remembering, and communicating (Csordas, 1990; Farnell, 1999; Ness, 1996). In dance, movement qualities such as restraint, force, balance, rhythm, coordination, and spatial projection may carry cultural significance beyond their technical form. From this perspective, the contrast between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi should not be understood only as a contrast between soft and vigorous movement styles. It should also be examined as a bodily expression of civil cultivation, martial discipline, regional ethos, and collective cultural identity.

Cultural semiotics offers another useful approach for analysing Luozi Dance. Semiotic theory understands signs as systems through which meaning is produced and interpreted within specific cultural contexts (Peirce, 1958; Chandler, 2022). Applied to dance, semiotic analysis allows movement, gesture, costume, props, rhythm, and spatial organisation to be interpreted as interconnected sign systems rather than isolated artistic features. Within Cangzhou Luozi Dance, the folding fan, clapper, whip, costume, rhythmic pattern, gaze direction, and spatial formation all have the potential to communicate cultural meaning through performance. However, existing research has rarely analysed these performative elements systematically as embodied signs.

Current scholarship on Cangzhou Luozi Dance has made valuable contributions to historical documentation, regional classification, preservation, and stylistic description. Earlier studies

recorded the origin, performance forms, costumes, props, and local transmission contexts of the dance. More recent studies have increasingly considered heritage preservation, digital dissemination, education, and institutional safeguarding. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature remains descriptive and contextual. It often explains where Luozi Dance originated, how it spread, and how it has been preserved, but pays less attention to how meaning is embodied in movement and how the Wen–Wu structure operates within performance itself.

A further limitation concerns the separation of historical description from theoretical interpretation. Studies that focus on the historical formation of Luozi Dance often do not explain how regional history and cultural experience become embodied in performance practice. Similarly, studies that describe movement, rhythm, props, or costume rarely examine how these elements function together as a wider cultural and symbolic system. As a result, the relationship between historical continuity, embodied performance, and symbolic meaning remains insufficiently theorised.

The Wen–Wu structure is especially important in this regard. Existing studies often acknowledge the distinction between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi, but this distinction is usually treated as a difference between refined and martial performance styles. Less attention has been given to how the two forms generate meaning through contrast, complementarity, interaction, and shared performance structure. The meaning of Wen Luozi becomes clearer in relation to Wu Luozi, and vice versa. Therefore, the two should be analysed not as separate categories, but as a relational performance system through which civil and martial values are embodied and communicated.

This article responds to these gaps by examining Cangzhou Luozi Dance as an embodied symbolic system. It focuses on how Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are constructed through movement vocabulary, gesture, rhythm, props, spatial organisation, and performative interaction. By integrating perspectives from embodiment theory, cultural semiotics, and performance studies, the article moves beyond descriptive documentation and examines how Wen–Wu meanings are produced through bodily practice. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Cangzhou Luozi Dance as a living folk performance tradition in which cultural meaning is enacted through the body.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design with an ethnographic orientation to investigate the cultural meanings and performative construction of Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi in Cangzhou Luozi Dance. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore embodied practice, symbolic representation, and culturally situated interpretation that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

An ethnographic perspective enabled the researcher to examine Luozi Dance within its natural cultural environment rather than treating performance as an isolated artistic product. The study focused on how cultural meanings are produced through movement, rhythm, gesture, props, performer interaction, and community participation in everyday performance contexts. This

approach is consistent with ethnographic studies of dance and performance that emphasise the relationship between embodied practice and social life (Geertz, 1973; Sklar, 2001).

3.2 Participants and Field Site

Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Nanpi County, Cangzhou City, Hebei Province, which is widely recognised as one of the major centres of Cangzhou Luozi Dance transmission. Fieldwork was conducted intermittently between 2024 and 2025 in Nanpi County and the broader Cangzhou region, including observations of rehearsals, village performances, festival activities, and informal practice sessions.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with extensive experience in performance, transmission, and cultural preservation. Eight participants were interviewed, including an officially recognised Intangible Cultural Heritage inheritor, senior performers, active practitioners, a folk music accompanist, and community participants familiar with local Luozi traditions. Participants had between 10 and 40 years of involvement in Luozi-related activities.

Limited snowball sampling was also used during fieldwork, whereby participants recommended additional knowledgeable individuals within the local Luozi community.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through four complementary methods: ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, audio-visual documentation, and archival research.

Ethnographic observation constituted the primary source of data. Rehearsals, village performances, festival activities, and informal practice sessions involving both Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi were observed. Detailed field notes documented movement patterns, rhythmic structures, prop use, spatial organisation, performer interaction, and audience engagement.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with performers, inheritors, musicians, and community participants. Interviews focused on the meanings of Wen and Wu, performance practice, cultural transmission, heritage preservation, and contemporary transformation. Interviews generally lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded when participants provided consent.

Audio-visual documentation, including photographs and video recordings, was used to capture movement details, prop manipulation, spatial arrangements, and performance contexts that could not be fully represented through written notes alone.

Archival and documentary sources, including local gazetteers, heritage records, cultural bureau documents, and previous studies on Luozi Dance, were consulted to contextualise contemporary observations within a broader historical framework.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis combined thematic analysis, semiotic interpretation, and comparative performance analysis.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), interview transcripts, field notes, visual materials, and documentary sources were coded and organised into recurring themes. Major themes included Wen–Wu differentiation, embodied discipline, symbolic representation, cultural transmission, and heritage continuity.

Semiotic analysis was subsequently applied to interpret movement, gesture, rhythm, costume, props, and spatial organisation as cultural sign systems. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, performance elements were examined as embodied signs through which cultural meanings are communicated. Particular attention was given to how Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi express contrasting yet complementary cultural values through movement quality, rhythm, and performative interaction.

Comparative analysis was employed to identify similarities and differences between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi across movement vocabulary, spatial organisation, prop use, rhythmic structure, and performance dynamics. Interview narratives were further analysed to understand how performers and community members interpret the cultural significance of these performative distinctions.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

To enhance credibility, triangulation was employed by comparing findings across observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, and archival sources. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to verify interpretations and ensure that analytical conclusions remained consistent with local understandings of Luozi Dance.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to fieldwork. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Particular attention was paid to the respectful representation of local cultural knowledge and intangible cultural heritage practices.

4.0 FINDINGS: Wen–Wu Duality and Embodied Performance in Cangzhou Luozi Dance

This section presents the main findings of the study by examining how Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are symbolically constructed and embodied through performance practice. The analysis shows that Wen and Wu are not merely two separate performance styles, but a relational structure through which civil and martial values are made visible, enacted, and negotiated in Cangzhou Luozi Dance. The findings are organised into four themes: the symbolic construction of Wen Luozi, the martial signification of Wu Luozi, the embodied movement vocabulary of Wen Luozi, and the performative intensity of Wu Luozi.

4.1 Symbolic Construction of Wen Luozi

The symbolic meaning of Wen Luozi is closely associated with civility, refinement, restraint, and ethical composure. In performance, Wen Luozi does not function simply as a theatrical role. Rather, it operates as a culturally recognisable figure through which civil values are

communicated in embodied form. Within the wider Chinese Wen–Wu framework, Wen is associated with literary cultivation, ritual propriety, moderation, and disciplined self-regulation. These meanings are expressed in Wen Luozi through upright posture, lowered shoulders, controlled arm extension, softened gaze, moderated rhythm, and restrained spatial movement.

Field observations conducted during Spring Festival performances in Cangzhou showed that Wen Luozi performers consistently maintained controlled bodily alignment and limited spatial expansion. Their hand gestures were rounded rather than forceful, and their gaze was often softened or downward-oriented. From a semiotic perspective, these bodily features function as embodied signs of civility and restraint. Upright posture and controlled alignment index bodily self-regulation, while restrained gesture and moderated pacing symbolise culturally recognised ideals of composure, propriety, and civil conduct.

Practitioners' explanations further confirm this interpretation. One senior performer explained, "The Wen role is not about showing power. The audience should immediately feel calmness and respect from the posture and expression" (Interviewee 1, senior performer, 2025). Another instructor emphasised that every movement in Wen Luozi must appear controlled and steady, because careless or aggressive movement would weaken the audience's recognition of Wen (Interviewee 2, dance instructor, 2025). These accounts indicate that performers understand Wen Luozi not only as a technical movement style, but also as an embodied form of cultural meaning.

The folding fan is especially important in the symbolic construction of Wen Luozi. In performance, the fan is not merely a decorative object; it operates as a sign of refinement, composure, and cultivated movement control. Observations of fan manipulation showed that performers used slow opening and closing actions, circular wrist rotations, and measured directional gestures. These movements were coordinated with restrained footwork and limited spatial expansion. The fan therefore becomes an extension of the body, allowing refinement and restraint to be made visible through controlled movement.

The significance of restraint is also expressed through movement amplitude and pacing. Wen Luozi performers avoid excessive force, abrupt directional change, and exaggerated bodily projection. Instead, meaning is produced through moderation, continuity, and controlled transition. In this sense, restraint is not the absence of expression, but a specific performative quality through which civil values are embodied and communicated. The symbolic identity of Wen Luozi is therefore formed through the integration of posture, gesture, gaze, fan manipulation, rhythmic moderation, and bodily control.

4.2 Martial Signification of Wu Luozi

In contrast to the civil composure of Wen Luozi, Wu Luozi functions as the primary embodiment of martial signification within Cangzhou Luozi Dance. It communicates courage, discipline, vitality, authority, and collective strength through forceful bodily projection, intensified rhythm, expanded spatial movement, and the use of martial props. However, martiality in Wu Luozi does not refer to uncontrolled aggression. Rather, it is expressed as regulated strength, rhythmic discipline, and coordinated bodily force.

Field observations showed that Wu Luozi performers used expansive arm gestures, forceful stomping patterns, accelerated stepping sequences, abrupt directional changes, and intensified spatial projection. These movement qualities were often accompanied by loud percussion and vocal rhythmic cues. Compared with Wen Luozi, Wu Luozi produced a heightened performative atmosphere characterised by momentum, pressure, and energetic expansion.

From a Peircean semiotic perspective, these features operate as embodied signs of martial courage. Forceful stomping and broad bodily projection index physical strength and readiness for action. Accelerated rhythm and abrupt directional shifts signal decisiveness and responsiveness. Through repeated use within local performance contexts, these movement forms become culturally recognisable markers of courage, resilience, discipline, and martial authority.

The whip is one of the most prominent props associated with Wu Luozi. During observed performances, performers swung the whip in synchronisation with percussion accents and bodily turns, producing both visual and acoustic intensification. The whip extends the performer's movement range and amplifies the impression of force. At the same time, its use requires precise control, timing, and spatial awareness. Thus, the whip does not merely represent martial power; it also demonstrates the disciplined regulation of that power.

Practitioners repeatedly stressed that Wu Luozi requires control as well as strength. One senior performer explained that Wu Luozi is “not simply about looking fierce,” because the movements must show power while remaining controlled (Interviewee 3, senior Wu Luozi performer, 2025). Another performer stated that the audience should immediately feel strength and determination from the stepping, rhythm, and whip (Interviewee 4, Wu Luozi performer, 2025). These accounts show that martial courage in Wu Luozi is understood as a coordinated and culturally meaningful form of bodily expression.

Collective intensity is another important feature of Wu Luozi. Dynamic leaps, deep lunges, rapid turns, forceful landings, and accelerated stepping sequences are often performed in synchronisation with drums, gongs, cymbals, and clappers. These elements create a dense rhythmic and visual environment in which individual force becomes collective performance energy. One practitioner explained that Wu Luozi requires explosive energy, but that energy must remain connected to rhythm and timing (Interviewee 5, community practitioner, 2025). Another performer described group movement as a unified force created through rhythm, stepping, and turning (Interviewee 4, Wu Luozi performer, 2025). This suggests that the martial quality of Wu Luozi emerges not from individual physical display alone, but from collective coordination.

4.3 Embodied Movement Vocabulary of Wen Luozi

The movement vocabulary of Wen Luozi is characterised by moderated tempo, curved movement pathways, restrained bodily amplitude, and continuous transitional flow. Rather than relying on abrupt directional change or forceful projection, Wen Luozi emphasises smooth coordination between gesture, posture, breath, and rhythmic timing. Its performative quality is sustained through soft spatial extension, gradual transition, and controlled bodily regulation.

A key feature of Wen Luozi is rounded continuity. Movement is not presented as a series of separate actions; instead, one gesture gradually leads into the next. This is especially visible in the three-curves posture, or Sandaowan, in which the spine forms a softened S-shaped articulation linking the head, ribcage, and pelvis. The shoulders release downward while the pelvis remains grounded, creating counterbalance and stabilising movement flow. Through this coordinated spinal structure, the body maintains continuity across stepping patterns, arm trajectories, and upper-body phrasing.

The limbs extend from the torso without disrupting the overall flow. Elbows remain rounded, wrists responsive, and arm trajectories softened through moderated muscular tension. Field observations showed that instructors often emphasised torso-led movement, reminding younger performers to allow the curve of the body to lead the arm. This indicates that Wen Luozi movement depends on integrated bodily coordination rather than isolated hand movement.

Breath-guided phrasing further supports the movement structure of Wen Luozi. Inhalation initiates subtle lift and controlled expansion of the upper torso, while exhalation accompanies the lowering of the arms, waist rotation, and settling of weight into the ground. Brief suspensions occur at transitional points, such as the completion of a turn or before the placement of the fan. These pauses regulate tempo and clarify phrasing without interrupting movement continuity.

Eye–hand coordination is another central component of Wen Luozi performance. The eyes often precede bodily action by a fraction of a beat, creating anticipatory alignment before a gesture or spatial transition. Gaze direction, wrist articulation, fan trajectory, and rhythmic timing are closely coordinated. When the fan trembles through small wrist articulation, the gaze remains fixed on its tip. When the fan extends diagonally, the eyes follow the same pathway. Through this coordination, performers maintain continuity between visual focus and bodily action.

A senior performer explained this principle clearly: “The eyes must never run ahead of the hand, and the hand must not move without the eyes” (Interviewee 1, senior performer, 2025). This statement shows that Wen Luozi movement is governed by the continuous relationship between attention, gesture, and bodily regulation. Expressive variation is achieved not through large movement expansion, but through subtle changes in timing, gaze tracking, wrist rotation, hand trajectory, and rhythmic control.

Emotional subtlety in Wen Luozi is similarly produced through controlled movement pacing and moderated bodily amplitude. Performers regulate emotional intensity through breath timing, suspended transition, controlled weight distribution, and reduced movement velocity. Slight wrist tremors, softened gaze, restrained facial movement, and gradual spatial adjustment allow emotional variation to appear without disrupting the overall composure of the role. Thus, Wen Luozi embodies civil qualities through a movement system based on continuity, restraint, coordination, and controlled expression.

4.4 Embodied Movement Vocabulary of Wu Luozi

The movement vocabulary of Wu Luozi provides a clear contrast to the moderated flow of Wen Luozi. It is characterised by acrobatic movement, explosive projection, expanded spatial extension, accelerated directional change, and intensified rhythmic force. High kicks, sweeping turns, leaps, knee lifts, deep lunges, and rapid rotations contribute to a performative structure shaped by momentum, velocity, and bodily propulsion.

A defining feature of Wu Luozi is the alternation between grounded stability and airborne extension. Wide stances, deep knee flexion, and forceful stamping generate downward force before the body releases into upward projection through jumps, turns, or extended movement. Even when full aerial rotation is absent, performers use elevated knees, partial airborne turns, and off-centre balance shifts to create a sense of suspended momentum. This alternation between rooted stance and upward projection creates the dynamic quality characteristic of Wu Luozi.

From a performance perspective, Wu Luozi acrobatic movement requires coordinated lower-body propulsion, core stabilisation, and upper-body control. Elevation depends on rapid force transfer through the legs and pelvis, while the torso regulates balance during rotational movement and landing. Field observations showed that performers emphasised breath-supported force regulation, allowing explosive release while maintaining bodily control. One performer explained that force must be released quickly, but the body cannot lose stability; otherwise, the rhythm and sequence become disconnected (Interviewee 3, senior Wu Luozi performer, 2025).

Weapon handling is another important dimension of Wu Luozi movement vocabulary. Props such as the whip and clapper function as extensions of bodily movement, shaping trajectory patterns, movement amplitude, rotational timing, and spatial projection. Whip handling depends on grip regulation, stance stability, torso rotation, directional timing, and gaze tracking. Movement force is usually initiated through grounded lower-body engagement and then transferred upward through the pelvis, torso, arm, and weapon trajectory.

Three common trajectory patterns appear in Wu Luozi weapon handling: horizontal sweeps, diagonal directional transitions, and upward flicks or thrusts. These trajectories are coordinated with stepping structures such as bow stance, cross-step transition, and grounded recovery. Heavy percussion accents often coincide with downward projection, landing transition, or forceful directional change, while lighter rhythmic subdivisions accompany preparatory rotation or rebound movement.

Rhythmic intensity is central to Wu Luozi performance. Drums, gongs, cymbals, whip release, and clapper articulation regulate movement timing and directional emphasis. Heavy accents coincide with stamping, rotational completion, or weapon release, while syncopated patterns prepare acceleration and transition. Breath regulation and vocalised exhalation also contribute to force release and movement stability during intensified passages.

Collective synchronisation further strengthens the martial quality of Wu Luozi. In ensemble passages, performers coordinate stamping, upper-body projection, weapon trajectory, and directional transition with percussion timing. One performer noted that movement becomes powerful when everyone enters the rhythm together, because if one person moves too early or too late, the force weakens (Interviewee 4, Wu Luozi performer, 2025). This indicates that the

performative strength of Wu Luozi depends not only on individual physical ability, but also on collective timing, rhythmic alignment, and spatial coordination.

4.5 Music as Performative Organisation of Wen and Wu

Musical accompaniment plays an important role in organising the contrast and interaction between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi. In Cangzhou Luozi Dance, music does not function merely as a background sound. It regulates movement timing, choreographic pacing, ensemble coordination, spatial transition, and performative intensity.

The musical ensemble is traditionally divided into Wen Chang and Wu Chang. The Wen Chang ensemble generally consists of melodic instruments such as the Banhu, Erhu, Dizi, and Sanxian. These instruments support moderated rhythmic pacing and sustained melodic phrasing in Wen Luozi sequences. Bowed melodic lines often align with curved arm trajectories, gradual torso rotation, and softened stepping patterns. The Dizi contributes breath-like phrasing that supports tempo regulation and movement continuity.

By contrast, the Wu Chang ensemble is dominated by percussion instruments such as drums, gongs, cymbals, and clappers. These instruments regulate intensified rhythmic pacing and directional emphasis in Wu Luozi performance. Drum accents coincide with stamping, aerial transition, rotational completion, or weapon release. Gongs and cymbals contribute to escalation and accelerated projection. In ensemble sequences, layered percussion assists performers in coordinating collective timing during rapid directional change and expanded spatial movement.

Field observations showed that performers rely heavily on percussion cues for synchronisation. Stepping impact, whip release, rotational movement, and collective directional change were consistently aligned with drum downbeats and cymbal punctuation. One percussion instructor explained that the drum controls the timing of movement, and when the rhythm changes, the stepping and turning must change with it (Interviewee 6, percussion instructor, 2025). Another performer stated that music tells the body when to accelerate, suspend, and change direction (Interviewee 4, Wu Luozi performer, 2025).

The alternation between Wen Chang and Wu Chang contributes to the broader organisation of performance. Transitions between melodic pacing and intensified percussion allow changes in movement speed, bodily projection, and spatial density to unfold gradually. Music therefore provides the temporal infrastructure through which civil and martial qualities are differentiated, connected, and integrated within the full performance structure.

4.6 Summary of Findings

The findings demonstrate that Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are best understood as relational and embodied performance forms rather than as separate stylistic categories. Wen Luozi constructs civil meaning through restraint, refined fan manipulation, moderated tempo, curved pathways, eye-hand coordination, and subtle emotional control. Wu Luozi constructs martial meaning through expansive projection, acrobatic force, weapon handling, rhythmic intensity, and collective synchronisation.

The contrast between Wen and Wu is not absolute separation. Instead, their meanings are produced through mutual distinction and performative interaction. The restrained flow of Wen Luozi becomes more legible in contrast to the forceful projection of Wu Luozi, while the martial intensity of Wu Luozi gains cultural significance through its relation to the civil composure of Wen Luozi. Together, they form an embodied Wen–Wu system through which Cangzhou Luozi Dance communicates civil and martial values through movement, rhythm, props, and spatial organisation.

5.0 DISCUSSION

This study examined Wen–Wu duality in Cangzhou Luozi Dance through the relationship between symbolic construction and embodied performance. The findings demonstrate that Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi should not be understood as two isolated performance categories. Rather, they operate as a relational and integrated cultural system in which civil and martial values are differentiated, embodied, contrasted, and coordinated through movement, rhythm, props, spatial organisation, and performer interaction. This section discusses the theoretical significance of these findings in relation to embodied cultural logic, semiotic performance, performative integration, and the study of Chinese folk dance.

5.1 Wen–Wu Duality as an Embodied Cultural Logic

The findings suggest that Wen–Wu duality in Cangzhou Luozi Dance is not a fixed binary opposition, but a relational cultural logic enacted through performance. Although Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi differ clearly in movement quality, rhythm, props, and spatial projection, their meanings are produced through mutual contrast and interdependence. The restraint of Wen Luozi becomes more visible when placed beside the forceful projection of Wu Luozi, while the martial vitality of Wu Luozi gains cultural meaning through contrast with the composure and moderation of Wen Luozi.

This relational structure reflects the broader Chinese cultural understanding of Wen and Wu as complementary rather than purely oppositional orientations. In this context, Wen does not simply represent softness, nor does Wu simply represent force. Instead, Wen and Wu operate as two coordinated modes of cultural expression. Wen Luozi embodies civility, refinement, restraint, and composure, while Wu Luozi embodies courage, discipline, vitality, and controlled martial force. Their relationship therefore produces a performative model of balance in which moderation and strength, refinement and action, restraint and projection are brought into coordinated interaction.

This interpretation is supported by practitioners' own explanations. Performers repeatedly emphasised that Wen and Wu cannot exist separately within a complete Luozi performance. One senior performer noted that if there is only Wen, the performance lacks energy, while if there is only Wu, the performance loses balance. Such statements indicate that local practitioners understand the two forms not as separate stylistic categories, but as mutually defining components of one integrated performance system.

The theoretical significance of this finding lies in shifting the analysis of Wen–Wu from abstract cultural philosophy to embodied cultural practice. In Cangzhou Luozi Dance, civil and martial values are made visible through the body: through restrained gestures, forceful

stepping, curved pathways, intensified rhythm, fan manipulation, whip projection, spatial circulation, and ensemble synchronisation. The dance therefore demonstrates how cultural concepts become intelligible through repeated bodily performance.

5.2 The Body as a Medium of Cultural Signification

The findings also show that the body functions as the primary medium through which cultural meaning is produced in Cangzhou Luozi Dance. Movement, gesture, gaze, rhythm, props, costume, and spatial orientation do not operate as separate decorative elements. Instead, they form an embodied sign system through which Wen and Wu values are communicated.

In Wen Luozi, civil meaning is embodied through restrained movement amplitude, moderated tempo, rounded gesture, softened gaze, curved spatial pathways, and controlled fan articulation. These movement qualities create a performative image of composure, refinement, and regulated expression. In Wu Luozi, martial meaning is embodied through explosive projection, forceful stamping, acrobatic movement, accelerated transition, weapon handling, and intensified percussion. These elements construct a visible and audible image of martial strength, vitality, and collective force.

This confirms the value of an embodiment-based approach to folk dance analysis. If Cangzhou Luozi Dance were examined only through historical origin, costume description, or heritage classification, the deeper cultural meaning of movement would remain underexplored. The present study shows that meaning is not simply attached to movement from outside; rather, it is generated through the organisation of movement itself. The way a performer steps, turns, pauses, extends the arm, follows the fan with the gaze, releases the whip, or adjusts spacing all contributes to the construction of cultural meaning.

Props are especially important in this embodied sign system. The fan, clapper, and whip actively shape bodily articulation, rhythmic timing, spatial extension, and choreographic coordination. The fan extends the refined movement vocabulary of Wen Luozi by enlarging subtle wrist and hand gestures. The clapper regulates rhythmic continuity and ensemble timing. The whip expands the martial projection of Wu Luozi through trajectory, acoustic punctuation, and spatial force. In each case, the prop becomes part of the body's expressive system rather than an external accessory.

Costume and spatial organisation further reinforce embodied signification. Sleeve length, textile weight, layering, ornament density, and fabric response shape how bodily movement becomes visible to the audience. Circular pathways, linear formations, diagonal transitions, and performer-audience orientation regulate how Wen and Wu are perceived within performance space. Meaning is therefore produced not only by individual movements, but also by how bodies, objects, rhythms, and spatial formations are coordinated.

5.3 From Symbolic Contrast to Performative Integration

Another important finding is that the contrast between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi does not result in fragmentation. Instead, Cangzhou Luozi Dance integrates these contrasting qualities through rhythm, spatial transition, ensemble coordination, and choreographic continuity. The performance depends on contrast, but it also depends on connection.

This is particularly evident in transitional passages. A restrained Wen Luozi sequence may gradually expand through increased rhythmic density, wider spatial projection, and stronger directional movement. Conversely, an intensified Wu Luozi sequence may return to moderated pacing, stabilised movement, and controlled circulation. These transitions prevent Wen and Wu from appearing as disconnected segments. Instead, they create a continuous process of performative modulation.

Music plays a central role in this integration. The alternation between melodic Wen Chang and percussive Wu Chang does not merely accompany the dancers; it organises the temporal logic of the performance. Melodic phrasing supports continuity, restraint, and curved movement, while percussion regulates acceleration, stamping, weapon release, and collective force. During transitional sequences, melodic and percussive structures may overlap, allowing movement quality to shift gradually between civil and martial modes.

Spatial organisation also supports integration. Circular movement may transition into linear projection; compact central positioning may be surrounded by wider rotational pathways; restrained upper-body articulation may occur simultaneously with expanded outer movement. Such arrangements allow Wen and Wu to remain distinct while still participating in a shared choreographic framework. The result is not simple opposition, but coordinated aesthetic tension.

This performative integration is important because it demonstrates that the Wen–Wu system in Cangzhou Luozi Dance is processual rather than static. Wen and Wu are not fixed symbolic labels attached to separate roles. They are continuously produced through movement transition, rhythmic adjustment, prop coordination, and spatial negotiation.

5.4 Semiotic Integration and Relational Meaning

The study also contributes to the semiotic interpretation of traditional folk dance by showing how meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple sign systems. In Cangzhou Luozi Dance, gesture, rhythm, props, costume, movement intensity, and spatial organisation operate together as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs.

At the iconic level, certain bodily and material forms resemble culturally recognisable images of civility or martiality. The fan gesture, restrained posture, whip trajectory, and martial-acrobatic movement all carry visual resemblance to broader cultural associations. At the indexical level, forceful stamping, acoustic intensity, controlled pacing, and bodily exertion provide sensory traces of strength, discipline, restraint, and collective energy. At the symbolic level, the conventional pairing of Wen and Wu roles refers to broader Chinese cultural understandings of civil-martial balance.

These semiotic levels do not function separately. Their interaction produces a dense field of embodied meaning. For example, the fan is visually associated with refinement, but its meaning depends on how it is moved, timed, controlled, and coordinated with gaze and posture. Similarly, the whip is associated with martiality, but its cultural meaning depends on rhythm, trajectory, spacing, force regulation, and performer control. Meaning therefore emerges not from the object alone, but from the embodied and relational process through which the object is performed.

This semiotic integration is central to understanding Cangzhou Luozi Dance as an embodied symbolic system. The dance does not communicate cultural meaning through single signs, but through the cumulative interaction of bodily, sonic, visual, and spatial elements. The Wen–Wu structure is therefore best understood as a relational sign system in which differentiated elements remain mutually dependent.

5.5 Contribution to Chinese Folk Dance Studies

The findings of this study contribute to Chinese folk dance studies in several ways. First, the study moves beyond descriptive documentation of Cangzhou Luozi Dance by interpreting its internal cultural logic. Existing research has often focused on historical origin, performance classification, regional folklore, and heritage preservation. While such work is valuable, it does not fully explain how cultural meaning is produced within performance. This study addresses that gap by analysing Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi as embodied and relational performance systems.

Second, the study shows that Chinese folk dance should be understood not only as a preserved cultural form, but also as a dynamic process of embodied signification. Cangzhou Luozi Dance communicates cultural values through bodily practice, rhythmic organisation, prop manipulation, costume response, and spatial coordination. This approach highlights the importance of examining how cultural meaning is enacted through the performing body rather than treating dance as a static repertoire of movements.

Third, the study provides a framework for analysing Wen–Wu duality in performance. Rather than treating Wen and Wu as abstract philosophical categories, the study shows how they are embodied through concrete movement vocabularies and performative structures. This contributes to broader discussions of how traditional Chinese cultural concepts are translated into living performance practice.

Finally, the study demonstrates the value of combining embodiment theory, cultural semiotics, and performance analysis in the study of regional folk dance. Such an approach allows researchers to connect micro-level performance details, such as gesture, gaze, rhythm, and prop handling, with macro-level cultural meanings, such as civility, martiality, balance, discipline, and collective identity. Through this integrated perspective, Cangzhou Luozi Dance can be understood as a living embodied cultural system rather than merely a local folk performance tradition.

5.6 Summary

This discussion has shown that Wen–Wu duality in Cangzhou Luozi Dance operates as an embodied, relational, and integrated performance system. Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are differentiated through movement quality, rhythm, props, spatial organisation, and performance intensity, but their meanings are produced through interaction rather than separation. The significance of Cangzhou Luozi Dance therefore lies not only in its historical or regional identity, but also in its capacity to transform civil and martial values into visible, audible, and collectively intelligible performance practice.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This article examined Wen–Wu duality and embodied performance in Cangzhou Luozi Dance by analysing the symbolic and performative relationship between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi. Drawing on ethnographic observation, practitioner interviews, audio-visual documentation, and archival materials, the study explored how civil and martial values are constructed and integrated through movement vocabulary, rhythm, props, spatial organisation, and performer interaction.

The study demonstrates that Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi are not merely two separate stylistic categories. Rather, they form a relational cultural system through which Wen and Wu values become visible and intelligible in performance. Wen Luozi embodies civility, refinement, restraint, and composure through moderated tempo, curved pathways, fan manipulation, eye–hand coordination, restrained gesture, and controlled emotional expression. Wu Luozi embodies martial courage, vitality, discipline, and collective force through acrobatic movement, forceful stepping, weapon handling, intensified percussion, expanded spatial projection, and ensemble synchronisation.

The relationship between Wen and Wu is therefore not one of rigid opposition. Although the two forms are differentiated through contrasting movement qualities, rhythmic structures, props, and spatial dynamics, their meanings are produced through interaction, complementarity, and performative integration. Through this relationship, Cangzhou Luozi Dance transforms abstract civil and martial values into a dynamic embodied symbolic system.

This article contributes to Chinese folk dance studies by moving beyond descriptive documentation and examining Cangzhou Luozi Dance as a living system of embodied cultural signification. It shows that traditional cultural concepts such as Wen and Wu are not only preserved in texts, rituals, or historical narratives, but are continuously enacted through bodily practice. Movement, rhythm, gaze, props, costume, and space function together as interconnected modes through which local performers communicate cultural values, collective memory, and regional identity.

At the same time, the study has several limitations. First, the research focuses primarily on Nanpi County and the broader Cangzhou region, meaning that its findings are context-specific and should not be generalised to all northern Chinese folk dance traditions. Second, the analysis is based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork and a relatively small group of participants, although these participants possessed substantial experience in performance, transmission, accompaniment, and community participation. Third, the article focuses mainly on Wen–Wu duality and embodied performance, while other important aspects such as audience reception, musical variation, gendered performance, digital dissemination, and contemporary heritage policy are not examined in depth.

Future research may therefore extend this study through comparative, longitudinal, and audience-centred approaches. Comparative studies could examine whether similar Wen–Wu structures appear in other Chinese folk dance or ritual performance traditions. Longitudinal research could investigate how Cangzhou Luozi Dance changes across generations, especially as younger performers encounter the tradition through schools, staged performance, festivals, and digital media. Further studies could also explore audience interpretation, gender representation, music–movement interaction, and the role of intangible cultural heritage policy in reshaping local performance practice.

In conclusion, Cangzhou Luozi Dance provides a valuable case for understanding how Chinese folk dance communicates cultural meaning through embodied performance. The interaction between Wen Luozi and Wu Luozi demonstrates that Wen–Wu duality is not simply a philosophical concept or symbolic opposition, but a living performance logic enacted through the body. This embodied Wen–Wu structure remains central to the artistic identity, cultural significance, and continuing vitality of Cangzhou Luozi Dance.

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