

Contemporary reconstruction of Sino-Korean legendary dance dramas: artistic conception versus narrative perspective

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Abstract. Contemporary adaptations of Sino-Korean legends in dance drama increasingly shifted from complete storytelling to conceptual expression, making the adjustment of narrative approaches a crucial driver of artistic innovation. Through a comparative case study of *The Butterfly Lovers*, produced by Beijing Dance Academy and the 2025 dance drama *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* by the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts, this paper explores the comparability of the two works from the perspective of intertextuality theory. By focusing on their narrative reconstruction strategies, examining how each adapts classic legends to achieve contemporary expression through distinct approaches, and exploring the divergences in reconstruction methods, objectives, and effects analysis, this study adopts text analysis, dance segment analysis, and comparative research. The findings indicate that Beijing Dance Academy's *The Butterfly Lovers* weakens plot logic, strengthens symbolic imagery, and integrates group dance and spatial scheduling to transform literary narration into an emotion-centered artistic conception. Conversely, the 2025 dance drama *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* by the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts restructures narrative perspectives and character relationships. The interaction among multiple viewpoints reveals a narrative framework that intensifies relational dynamics and dramatic tension. The two works demonstrate starkly divergent narrative paths: the former prioritizes the creation of artistic conception, while the latter emphasizes the reorganization of narrative perspectives. Such differences are not only manifested in stage presentation but also reflect culturally distinct approaches to interpreting and reconstructing traditional texts.

Keywords: Sino-Korean dance drama, narrative reconstruction, intertextuality, artistic conception, narrative perspective

1. Introduction

Classic Sino-Korean legends have been repeatedly adapted into contemporary dance dramas, reflecting the ongoing transformation of traditional narratives in modern performing arts. However, existing studies mainly remain at a macro level, lacking systematic comparative frameworks and in-depth analysis of choreographic structures and narrative mechanisms in specific works.

This study addresses a central question: how do contemporary dance dramas reconstruct classical legends through different narrative strategies, and how these differences are reflected in reconstruction methods, purposes, and effects. To answer this question, this paper adopts textual analysis, choreographic segment analysis, and comparative methodology. It selects the Beijing Dance Academy version of *The Butterfly Lovers* (hereinafter *BDA Butterfly Lovers*) and the 2025 Korean dance drama *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* as case studies. From an intertextual perspective, the two works share a common narrative foundation while exhibiting distinct cultural expressions, which establishes their comparability [1]. On this basis, the study constructs an analytical framework centered on reconstruction methods, purposes, and effects to clarify narrative mechanisms in dance drama adaptation and contribute to Sino-Korean comparative research. This paper is organized as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical framework, followed by case analyses and a comparative discussion.

2. Theoretical framework and research design

2.1. Intertextuality and the comparability of adaptation

Intertextuality theory provides a fundamental framework for dance drama adaptation and cross-media comparison. It posits that no text exists independently, and meaning emerges through the transformation and interaction of prior texts [2]. In dance drama adaptation, this process involves not only the reorganization of narrative logic but also the reconfiguration of bodily movement, stage space, and cultural symbols. As a result, literary texts are translated into performative forms, and multiple layers of meaning are constructed through the interaction between movement, music, and visual elements [2].

Dance drama, as a performance form centered on physical movement, differs from literary narration in its mode of storytelling. It conveys characters, conflicts, and emotions through bodily expression, spatial organization, and musical structure [3]. In the process of adaptation, complex plots are often condensed, while emotional expression and symbolic imagery are strengthened, leading to a shift from linear narration to affective and atmospheric construction [3, 4]. Choreographers typically reorganize narrative sequences, simplify plot details, and emphasize symbolic scenes to transform literary narratives into physical storytelling [4, 5].

Within this framework, Chinese and Korean dance dramas exhibit distinct narrative tendencies shaped by different cultural contexts. Chinese dance drama tends to emphasize imagery integration and atmospheric expression, reflecting the aesthetic principle of the integration of virtuality and reality [6]. In contrast, Korean dance drama places greater emphasis on character relationships and dramatic conflict, focusing on structural clarity and psychological expression [7, 8]. These differences result in divergent narrative approaches when adapting similar traditional sources.

2.2. Analytical framework: methods, objectives, and effects

Built upon the above theoretical foundations, this paper establishes a tripartite analytical framework encompassing reconstruction methods, objectives, and effects. Reconstruction methods refer to creators' manipulations of original texts, including plot compression, structural reorganization, narrative perspective shifting, and symbolic imagery intensification, which directly determine artistic presentation forms. Reconstruction objectives denote creators' expressive intentions, ranging from emotional catharsis and exploration of interpersonal relationships to resonance with contemporary aesthetic demands. Reconstruction effects represent the tangible stage outcomes of adaptive strategies and creative pursuits, covering narrative clarity, emotional delivery modes, and audience interpretive pathways.

This framework integrates intertextuality theory with dance drama narrative studies, translating abstract theoretical concepts into actionable analytical tools to support subsequent comparative discussion (Table 1).

Table 1. Three-dimensional analysis framework table

Dimension	Definition	Key Focus
Methods	Ways in which original texts are transformed	Narrative structure and artistic form
Objectives	Creative intentions behind adaptation	Meaning and expressive direction
Effects	Observable outcomes on stage	Audience reception and narrative result

3. Comparative case analysis: two modes of narrative reconstruction

3.1. Case 1: artistic conception-oriented reconstruction in *The Butterfly Lovers*

The *BDA Butterfly Lovers* reconstructs the traditional narrative by downplaying linear plot progression and emphasizing emotional experience, forming an affect-centered aesthetic mode of expression [9, 10].

In the process of narrative reconstruction, the *BDA Butterfly Lovers* employs a series of creative techniques to transform the traditional narrative into an "atmospheric" expression. In terms of its reconstruction methods, the work first compresses the plot by breaking down the original story into multiple emotional segments, using dance movements as the fundamental narrative units. This selection and reorganization of the plot exemplifies the typical method by which dance dramas convert literary narratives into bodily narratives during adaptation [3]. For instance, in the segment from "Meeting" to "Emotional Development", the duet does not depict specific events; instead, it establishes the characters' relationship through symmetrical movements and a gradual convergence of their body weights, allowing emotions to be perceived through the dynamic interplay of movements rather than through explicit plot development. Simultaneously, in terms of imagery construction, the work creates a cohesive emotional field through the fluid formations and rhythmic interplay of the group dance, transforming collective movement into a medium for emotional diffusion. This approach of substituting symbolic imagery for concrete narrative aligns with the narrative strategy employed in mythological dance dramas, which enhances expression through metaphor and symbolism [5]. In spatial arrangement, the work participates in narrative construction through the division and transformation of stage space; this method of constructing relationships and meaning via stage direction essentially embodies the narrative function of the dance drama's "stage direction language" [3]. Furthermore, at the level of narrative subjects, the work downplays the logical progression of characters' actions, shifting their role from "plot drivers" to "emotional carriers", thereby centering the narrative around emotions—a characteristic corresponding to the structural shift in dance dramas from "plot-driven narration" to "psychological narration" [3].

Building upon the aforementioned methods, in terms of its reconstruction objectives, to shift from "story narration" to "emotional expression". Creative interview materials indicate that the production team explicitly focused their expression on emotional experience rather than story reproduction [9]. Relevant media reports also note that the work does not center on traditional love narratives but emphasizes emotional and aesthetic experiences [10]. Under this objective, the work strengthens the emotional connections between characters through bodily movements and stage atmosphere, shifting the narrative focus from event progression to emotional presentation. This mode of expression aligns with the aesthetic principle of Chinese dance, which emphasizes the interplay between the real and the virtual—creating an aesthetic realm through the integration of movement and imagery [6]. Additionally, by downplaying external conflicts, the work shifts character

expression toward internal states, thereby enhancing the subjectivity of the narrative and elevating specific stories into emotionally resonant expressions of universal significance.

In terms of reconstruction effects, the aforementioned methods and objectives work energetically to create an emotion-centered narrative presentation. First, in terms of meaning generation, the rhythm of movements and spatial flow form a unified dynamic system, enabling audiences to comprehend the work through visual rhythm rather than plot logic. This holistic expression embodies the aesthetic characteristic of "integration of scene and emotion" in Chinese dance [6]. Second, in terms of narrative presentation, the diminished emphasis on plot leads to a certain degree of ambiguity in the work, requiring audiences to infer character states through movement patterns and spatial relationships, thereby fostering an open-ended narrative. Finally, regarding the audience-performance relationship, the audience's interpretive approach shifts from "following the story" to "interpreting movements". Dance movements, spatial structures, and rhythmic variations collectively constitute a meaning system, allowing audiences to construct meaning during their perception process.

In summary, the *BDA Butterfly Lovers* achieves a shift from event-driven narration to emotional expression through restructuring techniques such as plot condensation, imagery construction, spatial arrangement, and thematic internalization. These methods, centered on emotional conveyance, are seamlessly integrated and ultimately manifest on stage as a narrative experience characterized by the creation of artistic conception and aesthetic immersion.

3.2. Case 2: perspective-oriented reconstruction in *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon*

Chunhyang-Dan Jeon retains the traditional narrative framework while employing perspective reconstruction and narrative reorganization to transform a single-line romantic narrative into a multi-perspective structure [11], achieving a contemporary reinterpretation centered on enhanced audience understanding and participation.

In terms of its reconstruction methods, the contemporary Korean dance drama *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* achieves reinterpretation of the traditional text through "perspective reconstruction" and "narrative reorganization". This approach fundamentally involves restructuring the existing narrative framework: while preserving the original story's basic structure, it reconfigures character relationships, narrative focus, and temporal arrangements to establish a new stage-narrative logic. Moreover, dance drama narratives do not depend solely on verbal dialogue but construct an "action–relationship–conflict" chain through bodily movements, spatial dynamics, and interpersonal interactions, with the interplay between solos, duets, and ensemble dances serving as key drivers of narrative development [7]. Building on this foundation, the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* employs a storytelling-based reconstruction strategy—by reorganizing narrative elements and reinforcing audience cognitive pathways—to reinvent the traditional story for contemporary audiences. Bae, Seo-Yeon et al. emphasize that this storytelling reconstruction strategy goes beyond mere retelling; it enhances audience understanding and experience through structural refinement, situational recreation, and emotional amplification, allowing viewers to engage with the text in new ways while remaining familiar with its core content [12]. In terms of perspective reconstruction, the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* abandons the traditional single-narrative structure centered on Chunxiang and Li Menglong. Instead, by shifting the narrative focus to the character "Xiangdan", Xiangdan evolves from a supporting figure in conventional storytelling into a key observer and participant, transforming the narrative from a single-centered approach to a multi-perspective framework. Performance reviews note that through its reimagining of narrative perspectives and character relationships, the work restructures the traditional story in ways distinct from existing versions, thereby enhancing the audience's perception of character dynamics and situational

shifts [11]. This strategy establishes an effective communication bridge between the original text and contemporary audiences.

Secondly, in terms of its reconstruction objectives, the core of this work lies not merely in reproducing the classic story, but in reorganizing the narrative and adjusting perspectives to endow the traditional text with new interpretive significance within a contemporary context. Relevant research indicates that the ultimate goal of story-based dance drama creation is to stimulate the audience's associative mechanisms through its narrative structure, enabling them to actively participate in meaning construction during viewing and thereby enhancing the work's communicative impact and acceptance [13]. Thus, the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* reconfigures character relationships and narrative focus, transforming the originally singular love narrative into a multidimensional expression of emotions and social significance. This transformation not only preserves the cultural essence of the traditional text but also addresses the aesthetic expectations and reception patterns of contemporary audiences.

Finally, in terms of narrative reconstruction outcomes, the aforementioned methods and objectives collectively produce a storytelling effect characterized by "multi-perspective narration" and "audience-participatory interpretation". Structurally, the shift and reorganization of perspectives endow the work with a non-linear framework, allowing the narrative to unfold through the interplay of multiple characters and relationships rather than relying solely on a single protagonist, thereby enhancing narrative depth. Secondly, regarding meaning generation, the work retains the original story framework while reconstructing it, enabling audiences to compare and reinterpret the "known narrative" against the "new interpretation"—a process grounded in the intertextual meaning-generation mechanism [2]. Lastly, in terms of audience participation, viewers cease to be mere recipients of the story but become co-constructors of meaning through the narrative reconstruction. This shift from passive "watching" to active "participation" significantly expands the work's aesthetic openness and interpretive potential.

In summary, the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* achieves a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional texts through perspective shifts, narrative restructuring, and the incorporation of storytelling mechanisms. These approaches aim primarily to enhance audience comprehension and engagement, ultimately manifesting on stage as multi-perspective narratives and open-ended meaning-making, thereby facilitating the transition from traditional storytelling to modern expression.

4. Divergences in cultural logic and expressive mechanisms

4.1. Comparative analysis of reconstruction strategies

The two works adopt fundamentally distinct structural strategies in narrative reconstruction, reflecting the differentiated adaptive paths of Sino-Korean traditional-themed dance dramas [1]. The *BDA Butterfly Lovers* condenses and dilutes linear plotlines, fragmenting storytelling into emotion-driven segments. By contrast, *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* retains core conflicts, rearranges event sequences, and intensifies dramatic tensions through deliberate plot reorganization, representing two divergent paths: plot dilution versus plot restructuring.

In narrative subjectivity, *The BDA Butterfly Lovers* internalizes character agency, transforming protagonists from active agents to emotional carriers. The *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* decentralizes narrative subjectivity through multi-character interaction, forming a polycentric narrative system, reflecting the opposition of subjective internalization versus subjective diversification.

The *BDA Butterfly Lovers* prioritizes aesthetic experience creation, guiding audiences to derive meaning from perceptual aesthetic immersion. The *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon*, however, focuses on the contemporary critical translation of classic narratives, updating traditional texts with realistic social connotations through

structural and relational adjustments. This forms the contrast between aesthetic expression orientation and critical expression orientation.

In textual adaptation, *The BDA Butterfly Lovers* transforms literary narration into poetic expression by weakening plot logic and strengthening symbolic imagery, prioritizing aesthetic perception over plot cognition. The *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* production clarifies social thematic connotations through explicit relational and structural design, realizing contextual reinterpretation, and representing poetic aesthetic transformation versus realistic contextual reinterpretation.

In audience reception, diluted plots and intensified symbolism render *The BDA Butterfly Lovers* narratively ambiguous, requiring audience perceptual supplementation. The *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* maintains rigorous logical coherence via prominent conflict design and relational narration, ensuring straightforward audience comprehension, forming the opposition of open-ended ambiguity versus directional clarity.

4.2. Comparative analysis of cultural aesthetics and implications

The differences between Chinese and Korean dance dramas in terms of reconstruction methods, objectives, and effects are not merely distinctions in creative techniques, but reflect deeper divergences in how the two cultures transform traditional heritage and shape stage aesthetics. *The BDA Butterfly Lovers* adopts an imagery-based approach, weakening plot progression while emphasizing symbolic imagery, emotional expression, and spatial flow. This approach is closely related to Chinese dance aesthetics, which values the integration of the virtual and the real and the fusion of emotion and scene [6]. Rather than fully narrating the story, Chinese dance drama tends to leave interpretive space for the audience through movement, atmosphere, and symbolism, embodying an aesthetic tradition that prioritizes imagery, subtlety, and the interplay between emotion and environment.

In contrast, the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* employs a perspective-reconstruction approach by reorganizing narrative subjectivity and character relationships. This method reflects the tendency of Korean stage narratives to emphasize interpersonal relations, social structures, and dramatic tension in contemporary adaptations [7, 11-13]. Korean dance drama thus tends to recontextualize traditional stories through structural reconfiguration, enabling them to function within a modern interpretive framework. This approach demonstrates a distinct aesthetic orientation that prioritizes structure, relational dynamics, and contemporary reinterpretation.

Therefore, innovation in contemporary legendary dance drama does not lie in simply altering plot details but in reconfiguring traditional cultural resources, aesthetic strategies, and audience interpretive pathways within different cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

From the intertextuality perspective, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of contemporary narrative strategies in Sino-Korean legendary dance dramas. The two representative works exhibit significant differences in narrative methods, aesthetic orientations, and stage effects. *The BDA Butterfly Lovers* constructs an emotion-centered aesthetic narration through the shaping of artistic conception, while the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* realizes a multi-perspective structural narration through the reorganization of character relationships. These differences not only reflect variations in individual creative choices, but also reveal culturally distinctive logics in the inheritance of tradition and pathways of contemporary innovation, shaped by differing aesthetic concepts and traditional cultural backgrounds in Chinese and Korean dance arts. The tripartite analytical framework of reconstruction methods, objectives, and effects established in this paper provides a standardized research paradigm for cross-cultural dance comparison.

The analysis of the *Chunhyang-Dan Jeon* primarily relies on public reports and interviews, lacking in-depth exploration of specific choreographic details.

Ultimately, the creation of contemporary legendary dance dramas represents both the inheritance of traditional cultural resources and the innovative reconstruction of classical narrative modes. Establishing effective transformation mechanisms between textual heritage and contemporary expression, and developing culturally distinctive artistic paths amid diverse modern contexts, remains a vital direction for future dance drama creation and academic research.

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