

# The Application and Value of Props in Dance Creation: A Case Study of the Hakka Scarf Language Dance

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## Abstract:

Hakka Scarf Language is a contemporary group dance for women choreographed by the author. This article examines the Hakka blue scarf, a key prop in the performance, focusing on three aspects: the design and application of the blue scarf in the choreography, and the significance and value of its selection as a dance prop. The discussion highlights the importance of dance props as a medium of expression in dance.

## Keywords:

Hakka women  
Blue scarf  
Dance props  
Choreography

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## 1. Introduction

In traditional Hakka society, the phenomenon of “women toiling while men idling” was prevalent. Hakka women took on extensive responsibilities, managing both domestic and external affairs, including child-rearing, caring for parents-in-law, and performing seasonal rituals. Their contributions have been vital to sustaining the development of Hakka society and culture. The dance Hakka Scarf Language is presented as a group performance celebrating Hakka women. The blue scarves, typically handmade by Hakka women, are products of intricate craftsmanship and hold deep cultural significance. These scarves accompany Hakka women through the phases of life, from vibrant youth to the serenity of old age. In the performance, the blue

scarves serve as pivotal props for movement design and choreography, depicting scenes of everyday life, such as labor, production, marriage customs, and child-rearing. The emotional connection between mothers and daughters highlights the theme of cultural inheritance. The choreography gracefully mirrors the strength and elegance of Hakka women, with movements inspired by the architectural beauty of enclosed Hakka houses. The interplay of dynamic and static elements renders the work both simple and profoundly moving. The performance celebrates and honors the admirable qualities of Hakka women, including their wisdom, independence, diligence, resilience, and ability to endure hardships with grace.

## 2. Application of the blue scarf in Hakka Scarf Language

In his book *Dance Morphology*, Professor Yu Ping verified the Chinese character “舞中舞,” which serves as the logical starting point for the original occurrence of Chinese dance. He proposed that the dynamic expression of “dancing with ears of grain in both hands” essentially emphasizes “dancing with props in hand”<sup>[1]</sup>. The use of props is a common feature in Chinese ethnic and folk dances. Examples include the handkerchief flowers in Northeast Yangko, the fans and square scarves in Huagudeng, the bowls held by Mongolian dancers, and the long sleeves used by Tibetan dancers. These props are traditional elements of ethnic and folk dances, often derived from inherent forms rooted in folk culture.

In dance works, however, there are also props that creators have refined and designed through observation and artistic thinking. For instance, in *Morning Rhapsody in the Rubber Plantation*, choreographed by Ms. Chen Qiao in the 1970s, the sickle—a tool of daily life—is employed as a dance prop to portray the hardworking and intelligent Li ethnic women rising early to tap rubber. In the dance segment *Morning Glow* from the dance drama *The Everlasting Radio Wave*, women gracefully fan themselves with cattail fans, vividly showcasing the delicacy and elegance of Shanghai women. Similarly, in the solo dance *The Mountain Guardian*, performed by a Yi ethnic man, feathers serve as abstract props to narrate the story of an elderly mountain guardian protecting and nurturing the birds that accompany him day and night. The blue scarves featured in *Hakka Scarf Language*, however, are not conventional props rooted in Hakka culture. Instead, they are life-inspired dance props refined by the creator through observation, adapted for artistic expression and creation.

### 2.1. Enriching movement vocabulary

The use of props enriches dancers’ physical movements, expands the artistic conception of the performance, and enhances the audience’s visual art experience. Props function not only as extensions of the dancer’s body but also as tools for artistic expression. In *Hakka Scarf Language*, dancers hold blue scarves that create visually dynamic effects through movements such as “waving,” “shaking,” “throwing,” and “pulling.” Acting

as extensions of the dancers’ upper limbs, these blue scarves elongate and clarify the lines of body movements, increase the range of motion, and enhance the perception of time and space, while also enabling diverse creative uses.

Firstly, when the blue scarves are thrown or waved in the air, they trace unique trajectories in space, synchronized with the rhythm of the dancers’ bodies. Secondly, the characteristics of the blue scarves, derived from their use in daily life, inspire movements rooted in labor and everyday activities, such as washing clothes, pounding rice, and carrying a baby. As cultural restrictions shape bodily expressions, some parts of the body are emphasized while others are constrained. For instance, “keeping hands in sleeves” restricts finger and palm movements but allows freedom of arm movements; “wearing a girdle” limits the waist and abdomen while enabling more movement in the chest and hips; “wearing a high bun” restricts the head and neck but highlights the flow and twisting of the torso<sup>[2]</sup>. Similarly, the blue scarves restrict the movements of the fingers, palms, and upper body. Given the historical migrations of the Hakka people, Hakka women have long been required to demonstrate resilience and strength, often undertaking roles as physically demanding as those of men. Known for their unbound feet and unconstrained chests, they embody robust and vigorous movement. Reflecting this, the choreographer emphasizes lower-body movements, crafting characteristic gaits that align with the image of Hakka women with unbound feet. The blue scarves, tied around the waist like aprons, enable movements such as wiping hands, picking vegetables, sewing, and pounding rice, transforming these practical actions into unique dance expressions shaped by the limitations of the props.

### 2.2. Expanding the stage space

Props play an essential role in enhancing the visual effects of the stage, which serves as the most direct means of artistic expression. In the dance segment *Rain on Plantain* from the dance drama *The Past Events in Shawan*, oil-paper umbrellas are rotated and tossed by the dancers, evoking the atmosphere of a Lingnan water town and portraying a vivid scene of Lingnan women playing in the rain. The stage presentation mirrors the structure of the narrative, achieving a sense of “echoing at the beginning

and the end.”

In *Hakka Scarf Language*, the blue scarves’ unique visual and stylistic features are used to great effect. In the beginning, the scarves are connected to create curtain-like or partitioned spatial settings, with the “mother” seated alone, weaving a blue scarf. This setting establishes the emotional tone and draws the audience into the story. At the conclusion, the Hakka women hold the blue scarves close to their chests, forming a circle, while the “daughter” solemnly dons the blue scarf woven by her mother, positioned prominently at the center. This act resonates with the opening scene, linking time and space to evoke a sense of continuity. In this work, the blue scarves transcend their role as props, becoming integral to the choreography. They illuminate the cultural essence of Hakka traditions and add richness and depth to the dance.

### 3. Significance and value of the blue scarf prop

#### 3.1. Identification of social roles

“Role” is a pivotal concept in sociology, referring to the position an individual occupies within a specific society or group and the behavioral patterns prescribed by that society or group<sup>[1]</sup>. Society assigns certain rights and responsibilities to roles, establishes corresponding behavioral norms, and often employs clothing and props to assist in role identification. Examples include a doctor’s white coat, a white-collar worker’s business card, and a chef’s kitchen utensils and stoves. “In dance, the identification of social roles is equally significant. Understanding who a character is allows us to grasp their origins and destination”<sup>[3]</sup>. The design and material of dance props can indicate the region, ethnicity, era, and characteristics of a work. These props provide virtual and symbolic interpretations of character identities, helping the audience differentiate between group and individual roles while clarifying character relationships.

The unique societal positioning of the Hakka ethnic group has imbued Hakka women with liberated “natural feet,” sturdy physiques, and the ability to perform various tasks such as farming, weaving, gathering firewood, animal husbandry, irrigation, cooking, and needlework. These skills, along with a strong work ethic and resilience, have not only been survival necessities but also value and

aesthetic standards for evaluating Hakka women<sup>[4]</sup>. In traditional Hakka society, a woman’s mastery of the four essential skills—“household management,” “fieldwork,” “cooking,” and “needlework”—was considered the standard for assessing her competence. To this day, most middle-aged and elderly Hakka women in Quannan, southern Jiangxi, are either familiar with or understand the process of producing blue scarves. From elderly women to teenage girls over ten years old, wearing blue scarves remains a common practice<sup>[5]</sup>.

The blue scarf of the Hakka women in southern Jiangxi is a significant cultural symbol, representing the local heritage. This prop enables audiences to clearly differentiate the Hakka female group portrayed in *Hakka Scarf Language* from other groups, such as Northeast women with handkerchiefs, Yi women with cigarette boxes, and Yunnan women with folding fans and hand towels. It serves as one of the most intuitive cultural markers, defining the role of the Hakka female group within the work<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### 3.2. Emotional value

One of the theoretical cornerstones of McLuhan, the founder of mass communication theory, is that “the medium is an extension of the human body.” In dance, these personal media function not only as a physiological and functional extension of the human body but also as an extension of the emotions and consciousness behind it. This concept can be represented as follows: Consciousness and emotional motivation → Human body → Clothing and props as media<sup>[1]</sup>. Dance entrusts emotional consciousness to props, utilizing them to shape characters and express emotions, achieving a dual extension of both the body and emotional consciousness. Emotional consciousness is a fundamental aspect of dance art. The essence of dance lies in using bodily movements to showcase thematic emotions and interpret storylines. Therefore, props should serve as tools to assist bodily expression and amplify emotional resonance, rather than being treated as mere objects<sup>[6]</sup>.

In the work *Hakka Scarf Language*, the blue scarf is employed as the primary prop to interpret the plot and evoke emotions. The choreographer intricately designs movements based on the storyline and characters, guiding the audience to appreciate the significance of the blue

scarf's inheritance through the emotional connection between mother and daughter <sup>[7]</sup>. Through movement and props, the choreographer portrays local women's life scenes, such as labor, production, marriage customs, and childbearing, highlighting the exceptional qualities of Hakka women, including wisdom, independence, diligence in managing households, and resilience in enduring hardships. The blue scarf becomes a medium through which the perseverance of Hakka women is illustrated, as they stand strong and shoulder family responsibilities. It symbolizes the creativity inspired by their labor and conveys their unwavering beliefs and

emotional connections to life <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

Props are indispensable and integral elements of dance. Regardless of how uniquely or innovatively the use of props is explored in choreography, their ultimate purpose must remain rooted in the work's intended content and ideas. This is because dance props are not merely objects—they are an extension of the dancers' bodies and, more importantly, a continuation of their emotions.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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