



The Morphological Aesthetics of Song Dynasty Jingdezhen Qingbai Porcelain Figures: A Practice-Led Framework for Contemporary Dance-Making

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Received: 22 January 2026 Revised: 6 February 2026 Accepted: 8 February 2026

Abstract

This research consists purposes were to study investigates the morphological aesthetics of Song Dynasty (960–1279) Jingdezhen Qingbai porcelain figurines and formulates a practice-led framework for translating their visual qualities into contemporary dance-making. Drawing on qualitative, arts-based research, the project conducted (a) structured visual analyses of six representative Qingbai figurines, (b) semi-structured interviews with five choreographers and two scholars, and (c) studio-based movement exploration complemented by an exploratory audience survey (n = 20). The results reveal three levels of transferable choreographic resources macro-structures (balance, symmetry and asymmetry), meso-phrases (arm extensions, weight shifts and spirals) and micro-movements (hand articulation and gaze modulation). Integrating these findings, the study proposes an Observe–Extract–Map–Test framework for practice-led translation that distinguishes dance-making as a systematic research process rather than an amorphous concept. This framework offers a replicable method for choreographers, educators and museum practitioners to activate historical visual art as sources of embodied innovation.

Keywords: Qingbai Porcelain Figurines, Morphological Aesthetics, Practice-Led Research

Introduction

The Song Dynasty (960–1279) marked a high point in Chinese ceramic culture, characterised by refined proportions, restrained decoration and a philosophical emphasis on naturalness and balance (Valenstein, S, 1988; Kerr, R. and Wood, N, 2004; Xie, Y, 2018). Jingdezhen's Qingbai porcelain exemplifies these aesthetic



principles through its translucent bluish-white glaze and elegant silhouettes and has been widely discussed in studies of Chinese material culture and ceramic technology (Harrison-Hall, J, 2001; Kerr, R. and Wood, N, 2004).

Within Qingbai production, small porcelain figurines depicting Buddhist deities, court ladies, attendants, and children constitute a significant yet comparatively underexamined category (Harrison-Hall, J, 2001). Unlike vessels, figurines foreground the human body: pose, gesture, facial expression and costume drapery become the primary carriers of meaning. Recent morphological studies emphasise that such formal elements are not merely decorative but structure visual rhythm, spatial balance and implied movement (Chen, H., Jia, H. and Liu, L, 2025). These features contain latent kinetic cues such as weight distribution, spinal alignment and implied motion that invite embodied interpretation rather than purely visual appreciation.

In contemporary dance scholarship, visual art is frequently cited as a catalyst for choreographic innovation, from early modern engagements with sculpture to contemporary cross-media practices (Craine, D. and Mackrell, J, 2000; Kurth, P, 2001). However, “dance creation” is often treated as a broad conceptual label without clearly distinguishing between conceptual design, studio experimentation and practice-based research. Practice-led research argues that artistic practice can generate knowledge when procedures, iterations and reflective documentation are made explicit and analysable (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018). Without such clarification, interdisciplinary inspiration risks remaining anecdotal rather than researchable.

Despite extensive scholarship on Song Dynasty ceramics and growing interest in practice-led dance research, three gaps remain. First, Qingbai figurine morphology is rarely analysed with a view toward embodied translation. Second, the relationship between specific morphological features and concrete choreographic decisions is seldom documented as a replicable procedure. Third, audience perception of artefact-inspired dance is often assumed rather than explored, even at an exploratory level (Koch, S. C, 2017).

Addressing these gaps, this study treats Qingbai porcelain figurines as repositories of embodied form and asks: Which morphological features of Song Dynasty Jingdezhen Qingbai figurines are most salient, and how can these features be translated into contemporary dance-making through a practice-led research process? By clearly separating what was found (Results) from what it means (Discussion), the study aims to contribute a concise, transferable framework that clarifies dance-making as a systematic research process and demonstrates how historical visual artefacts can inform contemporary performance practice.



The Purposes

1. To identify key morphological features of Song Dynasty Jingdezhen Qingbai figurines through structured visual analysis.
2. To map these features to dance-making variables (movement vocabulary, spatial composition, dynamics and performative quality) and test the mapping through practice-led studio work.
3. To formulate a concise practice-led framework that can be applied by choreographers and educators in other cultural-heritage-to-performance contexts.

Literary Review

This study is informed by scholarship from three interconnected domains: Song Dynasty ceramic art and Qingbai porcelain figurines, morphological analysis in visual and material culture studies and practice-led research in contemporary dance. Together, these bodies of literature provide the cultural, analytical and methodological foundations for translating artefact morphology into embodied movement practice.

Research on Song Dynasty ceramic production identifies this period as a high point in Chinese material culture, marked by refined aesthetic values and technological sophistication. Jingdezhen emerged as a major production centre due to its access to high-quality raw materials, advances in kiln technology, and increasingly specialised production systems (Kerr, R. and Wood, N, 2004). Qingbai porcelain, distinguished by its translucent bluish-white glaze achieved through controlled iron content and precise firing conditions, exemplifies Song aesthetic ideals of restraint, balance and natural harmony (Valenstein, S, 1988). Archaeological and art-historical studies document the widespread circulation and cultural significance of Qingbai wares in both domestic and export contexts.

Within Qingbai production, small porcelain figurines depicting Buddhist deities, court ladies, attendants and children form a significant yet comparatively underexamined category. Existing scholarship has primarily approached these figurines through iconographic interpretation, stylistic classification and technical analysis (Harrison-Hall, 2001). While such studies clarify symbolic meaning and production context, they rarely examine bodily posture, gesture and proportion as coherent aesthetic systems. Consequently, the potential of figurine morphology as a source of embodied or kinetic interpretation remains largely unexplored.

Morphological analysis offers a systematic method for documenting and comparing visual form. In visual culture and art-historical research, morphological approaches enable structured description of posture, proportion, gesture, spatial organisation and surface articulation (Rose, G, 2016). Recent interdisciplinary studies demonstrate the applicability of morphological coding beyond traditional art history. For example, Chen, Jia,



and Liu (2025) applied systematic morphological analysis to Song Dynasty Longquan porcelain vases, combining qualitative coding with comparative classification to reveal how formal variation encodes cultural and aesthetic values. Such research illustrates those morphological features can be analysed as structured systems rather than isolated stylistic traits. The present study adapts this approach to Qingbai figurines, with a specific focus on identifying formal features that may be translated into movement.

Practice-led research in dance provides a methodological framework in which artistic practice functions as both research process and knowledge production. Rather than treating choreography solely as a creative outcome, practice-led research emphasises studio experimentation, embodied exploration, and reflective documentation as valid research methods (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within contemporary dance scholarship, visual art has long served as a stimulus for choreographic innovation, from early modern engagements with sculpture to contemporary cross-media practices. However, such inspirations are often described impressionistically, without articulating systematic procedures that link visual form to choreographic decision-making.

Embodiment theory further supports the translation of artefact morphology into dance practice. Koch's (2017) framework of embodied aesthetics proposes that aesthetic meaning is apprehended through sensorimotor engagement rather than visual perception alone. Adopting specific bodily configurations can elicit corresponding affective states, shaping both performance quality and audience perception. This perspective suggests that embodying the posture or gesture of a Qingbai figurine may generate not only visual resemblance but also an internalised performative state aligned with the artefact's aesthetic character.

Research on creative cognition highlights both the generative and constraining effects of visual stimuli. Smith (1996) identifies the risk of creative fixation when artists replicate visual sources too literally. However, structured analytical frameworks can mitigate fixation by encouraging abstraction, variation and testing rather than imitation. This insight underpins the Observe–Extract–Map–Test framework proposed in the present study, which seeks to balance systematic analysis with creative freedom in dance-making.

In summary, existing literature establishes that Song Dynasty Qingbai figurines embody a sophisticated aesthetic tradition; morphological analysis provides replicable tools for documenting visual form; practice-led research legitimises artistic experimentation as knowledge production; and embodiment theory explains how physical form and affective experience are interconnected. Nevertheless, few studies explicitly link artefact morphology to choreographic processes and audience perception through a systematic, practice-led methodology. This study addresses that gap by integrating morphological analysis with studio experimentation and exploratory audience feedback to develop a transferable framework for contemporary dance-making.



Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, arts-based, and practice-led research design. The methodological framework was constructed to align directly with the three research objectives and to ensure analytical transparency and trustworthiness (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018).

1. Rationale for Method Selection

Morphological analysis was selected as the primary analytical approach because it allows for the systematic description of posture, gesture, proportion, and surface articulation in visual artefacts, facilitating comparative interpretation across cases (Koch, S. C, 2016; Chen, H., Jia, H. and Liu, L, 2025). Semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit choreographers' perspectives on how static visual forms may inform movement generation and compositional decision-making, an approach well suited to exploratory, practice-oriented inquiry (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018). An exploratory audience questionnaire was included to triangulate perceptual responses and assess whether the intended aesthetic translation was recognisable to viewers, without aiming for statistical generalisation (Koch, S. C, 2017).

2. Population and Target Groups

2.1 Visual Artefacts (Target Group 1): Six Qingbai porcelain figurines dating from the late Song to early Yuan period were purposively selected. Selection criteria included: (a) clearly articulated bodily posture: (b) legible hand gestures: (c) visible costume drapery and (d) availability of high-quality photographic documentation suitable for detailed morphological analysis (Harrison-Hall, J, 2001).

2.2 Key Informants (Target Group 2): Five professional contemporary dance choreographers (three based in China and two in Europe) and two dance scholars were recruited through purposive sampling. All participants had a minimum of ten years of professional experience in choreography, dance research or cross-disciplinary artistic practice.

2.3 Audience Participants (Target Group 3): Twenty dance students and interested audience members (aged 20–35) participated in the exploratory audience survey after viewing short video excerpts of the studio-based movement exploration.

3. Research Tools

3.1 Visual Morphological Analysis Coding Sheet: A structured coding sheet was developed to record five analytical dimensions: posture (spine, pelvis, base of support), gesture (hand shape and arm pathway), proportion (limb-length relationships), drapery (fold direction and implied flow), and facial expression (gaze direction and affect).



3.2 Interview Guide: Semi-structured interview questions focused on perceived movement qualities in the figurines and strategies for translating static visual forms into dynamic dance sequences (e.g., “How might you embody the balance suggested by this posture”).

3.3 Practice-Led Studio Protocol: A procedural framework guided studio exploration, consisting of four iterative steps: 1) imitating the figurine’s pose: 2) abstracting a selected morphological feature 3) constructing a short movement phrase and 4) documenting observations through video recordings and reflective notes.

3.4 Audience Questionnaire: The questionnaire included Likert-scale and open-ended items capturing perceived movement qualities (e.g., calmness, flow, balance) and perceived connections between the choreography and visual-art sources.

4. Data Collection

High-resolution images of the selected figurines were obtained from museum catalogues and archival sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms, recorded with participant consent, and averaged approximately 60 minutes in duration. Practice-led studio exploration comprised three sessions totalling six hours, during which twelve movement phrases were generated and documented. Audience participants viewed edited video excerpts (approximately three minutes each) and completed questionnaires anonymously.

5. Data Analysis Steps

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, enabling systematic identification of recurrent patterns across qualitative data sources (Braun, V. and Clarke, V, 2006).

5.1 Open Coding: Visual features, interview transcripts, studio notes, and audience responses were reviewed line by line to generate initial codes (e.g., “balance,” “asymmetry,” “flow,” “micro-gesture”).

5.2 Theme Development: Codes were grouped into higher-order themes corresponding to macro-structural, meso-phrasal and micro-movement levels. Patterns were compared across data sources to identify convergences and divergences (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018).

5.3 Mapping and Testing: Thematic clusters were mapped onto dance-making variables to construct a provisional Observe–Extract–Map–Test framework. Studio video logs and reflective notes were examined to assess how coded features influenced movement outcomes.

5.4 Triangulation: Findings from visual analysis, interviews, studio experimentation, and audience feedback were cross-checked to enhance analytical credibility and reduce single-source bias (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018).



6. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was supported through methodological triangulation, maintenance of an audit trail (coding sheets, interview guides, consent forms, and dated studio notes) and reflexive documentation of analytical decisions (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018). All interviewees and audience participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and all data were anonymised in reporting.

Results

This Research The researcher can classify the research results as follows

1. Morphological Features and Dance Translation

Structured analysis identified recurrent morphological features (Table 1). For example, the “royal ease” pose of the seated Guanyin featured a centred base and gentle spinal curve; this inspired balance-oriented phrases in which the dancer sustained weight over the supporting leg and executed slow weight shifts. The twisted torso of a standing court lady suggested asymmetry and initiated spiralling turns and off-centre floor work. Mudrā-like hand gestures, such as gracefully curved fingers or a prayer position, were translated into micro-gestural motifs and arm undulations. Flowing drapery folds encouraged continuous movement qualities and informed costume design with trailing fabrics.

Table 1 Mapping of Qingbai Figurine Morphology to Dance-Making Variables

Morphological Feature	Dance-Making Variable	Evidence Source
Centred base and balanced posture	Still anchor points; sustained balance; smooth weight transfer	Visual coding of figurines; studio logs; interviews (5/5 choreographers emphasised balance)
Asymmetrical torso and limb alignment	Off-centre body organisation; spiral pathways; directional shifts	Visual coding; studio video analysis; interviews (4/5 choreographers identified asymmetry as a key stimulus)
Elongated arm proportions	Extended limb trajectories; gradual unfolding movement phrases	Studio video analysis; interviews (5/5 choreographers); audience questionnaires (16/20 referenced arm extension)

Mudrā-inspired hand gestures	Micro-movement motifs; detailed hand articulation	Visual coding; interviews (3/5 choreographers highlighted hand details); audience responses emphasising hand expressiveness
Flowing drapery and garment folds	Continuous flow quality; kinaesthetic awareness of fabric interaction	Studio practice observation; audience questionnaires (18/20 associated movement flow with historical costume imagery)
Serene facial affect	Restrained performative state; soft gaze; internalised focus	Interview data; choreographers reported adopting a calm, meditative performance presence

2. Summary of Key Findings

2.1 Cross-Scale Transferability: Morphological features translate into choreography at macro-structural, meso-phrasal and micro-movement levels. For example, 4 of 5 choreographers spontaneously noted that asymmetry in the figurines informed off-centre phrases, while all interviewees described translating hand details into micro-gestures.

2.2 Structured Mapping: The Observe–Extract–Map–Test framework effectively guided translation. Studio logs show that 12 movement phrases were developed across three sessions, illustrating how coded features could be extracted, mapped and tested.

2.3 Audience Perception: The exploratory survey indicated that 90 % (18/20) of viewers perceived calmness and flow in the Guanyin-inspired phrases, confirming that the aesthetic essence was communicated without verbal explanation.

Conclusion

This research summarizes the results of the study according to the following

1. This study identified key morphological features of Song Dynasty Jingdezhen Qingbai porcelain figurines through structured visual analysis. Recurrent characteristics include centred posture, asymmetry, elongated limb lines, mudrā-like hand gestures, flowing drapery and serene facial expressions. These features were



systematically documented using a morphological analysis coding sheet, enabling comparative analysis across six representative figurines.

2. This study mapped the identified morphological features to dance-making variables, including movement vocabulary, spatial composition, dynamics and performative quality and tested this mapping through practice-led studio work. The findings demonstrate cross-scale translation at macro-structural, meso-phrasal, and micro-movement levels. The Observe–Extract–Map–Test procedure provided a structured and replicable process for translating visual morphology into choreographic outcomes.

3. This study formulated a concise practice-led framework Observe–Extract–Map–Test that can be applied by choreographers and educators in other cultural-heritage-to-performance contexts. The framework comprises four iterative steps: observing and documenting morphological features, extracting salient characteristics, mapping features onto choreographic variables, and testing and refining outcomes through embodied practice. It can be adapted to a range of visual artefacts and creative contexts beyond the present case.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that tangible cultural artefacts can function as sources of embodied knowledge rather than static visual references. Through a structured practice-led approach, historical artefacts can contribute simultaneously to academic research and contemporary creative practice.

Discussion

This Research The researcher can discuss the research results as follows

The findings indicate that morphological aesthetics can function as an embodied information system rather than a purely visual category. When posture, gesture, and proportion are coded as compositional variables, they become translatable into dance-making operations such as anchoring, contrast building, and phrase generation. This supports theories of embodied aesthetics, which propose that aesthetic meaning is apprehended through bodily engagement and sensorimotor experience rather than visual perception alone (Koch, 2017).

The balance between restraint and expressivity characteristic of Qingbai figurines centred bases paired with subtle asymmetries encouraged choreographic structures that alternate stillness and motion. This observation aligns with research on creative cognition suggesting that imposed constraints can enhance innovation by directing attention and problem-solving processes (Smith, 1996). In this study, morphological constraints derived from artefact analysis functioned as productive limitations that generated new movement vocabulary.

By articulating dance-making as an Observe–Extract–Map–Test procedure, the study clarifies “dance creation” as a practice-led research process rather than an amorphous concept. This procedural articulation



contributes to practice-led research by demonstrating how artistic processes can yield transferable analytical frameworks when supported by documentation and reflection (Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N, 2018). Unlike case-specific accounts of art-inspired choreography, the present study documents how specific morphological features were identified, mapped, and tested, enabling replication and adaptation in other contexts.

Several limitations should be noted. The study focused on six figurines and a small group of practitioners, and the audience survey was exploratory rather than statistically representative. These limitations restrict generalization but are consistent with the study's aim of developing transferable principles rather than predictive claims. They also inform directions for future research outlined below.

Discoveries or New Knowledge

A replicable Observe–Extract–Map–Test framework for translating artefact morphology into dance-making procedures. A cross-scale translation principle distinguishing macro-structure, meso-phrase, and micro-movement levels. Evidence that micro-details in artefacts (e.g., hand gestures) translate effectively into micro-movements, enriching choreographic texture. Recognition that embodying figurine posture can elicit corresponding affective states, supporting empathic embodiment in performance.

Suggestion

1. Suggestions for use

1.1 Choreographers can use the coding framework to generate movement vocabulary and compositional structures inspired by visual artefacts. The three-level translation principle offers a structured starting point for improvisation and choreography.

1.2 Educators and museums may implement “Dancing the Artifact” workshops in which students analyse artefacts and generate movement, fostering embodied engagement with heritage collections.

1.3 Performance curators can collaborate with museums to stage live interpretations of collections, enhancing visitor experience by translating static objects into kinetic performance.

2. Suggestions for next research

2.1 Expand the sample to include a broader range of artefacts and ceramic traditions (e.g., Longquan greenware, Baroque sculpture) to compare how different aesthetic principles influence movement vocabulary.

2.2 Incorporate digital technologies such as motion capture and projection mapping to visualise translations and engage interactive audiences.



2.3 Conduct longitudinal studies with larger audiences to assess the reception and educational impact of artefact-inspired performances.

2.4 Investigate cross-cultural adaptations by applying the framework to non-Chinese artefacts, thereby evaluating its universality.

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