

Educational Philosophies and Developments: A Systematic Review Towards Contemporary Chinese Tertiary Dance Education



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Abstract: Aims: Dance education shares great vitality and potential in the 21st Century. The Ministry of Education of China has issued several policies in a row since 2022, these documents included announcing dance as an independent discipline for arts education and the subject of dance is added as part of compulsory education in China, especially for secondary education. These governmental guidelines signify the importance of digging into the changing values and philosophies held by dance education today. To fulfill this purpose, this article aims to provide systematic review on tertiary dance education in China and generalize the basic features of its ontology. Methods: The article utilizes literature review and critical reflection as the main research methods, it proposes five keywords related to contemporary Chinese tertiary dance education: (1) Conservatoire-based tertiary education system; (2) Pedagogies and teaching methods; (3) The product-focused educational philosophy; (4) Spaces; (5) The evolving value of dance education in China, meanings and interpretations of the five keywords are further unpacked and discussed with references of dance scholarships both in Chinese and English. Conclusion: The article claims close association between Confucianism and philosophies of Chinese tertiary dance education, the philosophy of Confucianism set the tone for understanding the rules and expectations of tertiary dance education in China. More research needs to be conducted to articulate its connections and significance.

Keywords: Dance Education; Tertiary Education; Pedagogy; Educational Philosophy; General Education; Confucianism

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1 Introduction

Dance in China is perceived as a culturally constructed phenomenon with long historical developments and shifts, ranging from different feudal dynasties in ancient China to the contemporary PRC [1]. According to Chinese dance scholars, such as Yuan He and Tong Yan, dance has evolved significantly throughout the civilization of Chinese history, which included its purposes, functions, and labor divisions alongside with its development [2, 3]. Initially, from the first imperial dynasty of Chinese history – Xia Dynasty (c. 2070-1600BC) – to the last dynasty – Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), dance was generally viewed as a kind of informal art form that revealed strong human

emotions. It is until the contemporary China, with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, dance is gradually developed and affirmed as a subject in schools and a major in colleges and universities across China. This evolution of dance established the validity and social value of dance education, in the meantime, it also brings the necessity and importance of sorting out the philosophies held by dance education in the Chinese context today.

In 2022, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council Ministry of Education issued a new catalog of disciplines and majors in graduate education named No-

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tice on the Management Measures of the Catalogue of Disciplines and Majors in Graduate Education [4], the core value of the new catalog asks for promoting the reform and development of graduate education in China's new era. Apparently, the issue of the new catalog triggered a small 'earthquake' in the terrain of dance education, as for the first time since the founding of the PRC and after over 70 years' development, dance is elevated as an independent discipline subordinated to academic category of Arts Studies. To some extent, this historical change will inevitably shift the mechanism talents cultivation approaches and awarded degrees in terrain of tertiary dance education in China. Therefore, it is rather pertinent and timely to review and reflect keywords and philosophies of Chinese tertiary dance education in the past few decades. With this purpose in mind, the aim of the article is to provide a comprehensive and critical review towards Chinese tertiary dance education regarding to its philosophies.

Before delving into the keywords and philosophies of contemporary Chinese tertiary dance education, it is necessary to give a quick look at the history of Chinese dance education since the history of Chinese dance formed the philosophical foundation of contemporary Chinese tertiary dance education.

2 A Brief Review of Chinese Dance Education History

Back to the Han dynasty, Chinese scholars acknowledge that Yuefu (the Imperial Music Bureau) in the Han dynasty played a significant role in profiling why ancient people did music, poetry, and dance, and how might dance activities gradually shifted from self-pleasure to pleasing others [3]. The establishment of Yuefu in the Han Dynasty set the tone of professional dancer and choreographer as a labor force. Professional dancing began to emerge as a career, and the professional dancers' main job was to entertain the ruling class. Therefore, during this period dance education was often viewed as professional training for cultivating dancers who served in the palace. According to the current President of Chinese Dancers Association Feng Shuangbai, during this period the occupation of 'dancer' emerged [5], although it is worth noting that most of the performances during this time by the professional dancers were oriented towards entertainment for the emperor. It could be said that in the history of an-

cient China, dance for quite a long time was considered as a kind of performing art form only to be performed by specific types of persons who received specific dance training. Such circumstance continued and run through the feudal societies in the ancient China, it was until the established of the PRC and the modern education, the definition towards dance and dance education became more specific and entwined [6].

Wu Xiaobang, who was known as the 'Farther of New Dance' in the dance circle of China, defined the concept of 'dance' for three times, according to dance education researcher Jin Jin. In the book *A New Brief Introduction to Dance*, Wu wrote that "Dance is the art of movements. Based on the image of movements of human body, it analyses the natural or social phenomena of movements through natural or social laws of movements to display different formalized movements. This kind of movements, no matter expressing the thoughts and feelings of individual or group of people, is called dance" [7]. In 1982, Wu defined 'dance' for the second time in his book *A Brief Introduction to New Dance Art* (1982), articulating that "Dance is the art of body movements. All can be called dance once they, based on the organized and regular movements, through the choreographers' observation, experience and analysis of natural and social life, reflect distinctive characters and stories in brief form and using ingenious techniques, expressing the life, thought and feelings of individual and a group of people" [8]. In 1992, Wu defined 'dance' for the third time when he joined a team of scholars to edit the *Chinese Encyclopedia: Music and Dance* (1992), this time he articulated: "According to its nature, dance is the art of body movements. Generally, all that express people's feelings by organized and regular body movements can be called dance. But as an art that is performed on the stage, dance reflects people, events, thoughts and feelings in brief and typical movements and distinctive images based on the choreographers' observation, experience and analysis of nature and society" [9]. From the statements like 'art of movements', 'different formalized movements', 'organized and regular movement', and 'art of body movements', one can sense the strong leaning towards professional dance training when talking about 'dance' in the Chinese context. As an authoritative and important figure in Chinese dance terrain, Wu's definition surely influenced dance scholarships and the developments of Chinese dance education. Like other forms of education in China, the development of dance education reflects values, ideas, aesthetic views, and aes-

thetic interests of the governing class. Liao Yanfei, a Chinese dance researcher, who states that with people entering the class society, as a part of the superstructure, “dance education was inevitably influenced by the ideas of the governing class and also reflected the consciousness and class interest for certain social class” [10]. This statement applies to art productions including dance works across the globe, dance education, as part of the superstructure, also subordinates to the taste and interests of the governing class.

Chinese scholars and researchers mostly consider the beginning of modern dance education in parallel with the emergence of the People’s Republic of China [11]. According to Liu and Wang, the beginning of new China was strongly influenced by the model of Socialism developed in the Soviet Union, noted that all the construction and development of China was completely informed by “learning from the Soviet Union” [12], and obviously there was no exception for dance education. In 1954, the Soviet Union sent dance experts to China and helped to establish the first dance school – Beijing Dance School (later known as ‘Beijing Dance Academy’, BDA), the development of dance education in China was influenced by the Soviet Union model for more than half a century [13]. It was perceived that the trends of learning from Soviet Union at the time was not confined within the circle of dance, the nationwide learning trends certainly kept some ‘traditions’ borrowed until now. Kaiov, who was one of the Soviet educators and had greatly influenced contemporary Chinese education. He emphasized ‘subject-oriented’, ‘classroom-oriented’ and ‘teacher-oriented’ education and highlighted a mandatory curriculum paradigm and collectivist education [10]. Through applying Marxism within pedagogy, Kaiov’s educational theories were viewed as the model for a socialist country’s cultivation. Introduced in the 1950s, Kaiov’s educational theories have gradually become the “standard paradigm for China’s pedagogy” [14]. Jin Jin argued that under Kaiov’s influence, dance education in China also held onto strong characteristics of the Soviet model of dance education, especially prior to the 21st century.

In the textbook *Dance Education Study*, Lv Yisheng first summarized the characteristics and models of dance education in the former Soviet Union and China as the style of the “early professional dance education” [15]. It can be noted that early professional dance education relates to general dance education [15]. As Lv states, “the ‘early professional dance education’ aims to cultivate spe-

cializations (professional dance artists)” [15]. Based on Lv’s statement, Yu Ping, who was the vice president of BDA from 1996 to 2001, further explained that the early professional dance education highlights the purity of professional dance training and is usually considered an independent training system, separate from the general education [16]. From the statements made by Lv and Yu, one can note that the developments of the two lines of Chinese dance education – professional dance education and general dance education – are out of proportion, and apparently the former captured more attentions in China. This phenomenon certainly received attentions from policymakers and scholars in China, this will be further unpacked in section 3.5.

From a quick review on Chinese dance history, it is viewed that the philosophies of dance education are inevitably constructed and influenced by the developments of dance within the society. The identification of philosophies behind the scenes of tertiary dance education in China is conducive to fostering further understanding the differences among education institutions and strengthening educational meanings of dance teaching and learning in the context of Chinese higher dance education. The following section will focus on five keywords which shaped contemporary tertiary dance education in China.

3 Keywords and Philosophies of Contemporary Chinese Tertiary Dance Education

3.1 Conservatoire-based Tertiary Education System: The Leading Force of Dance Institutions in China

Philosophies and ideologies employed by dance education systems in different cultures could be distinct and varied [17]. Between educational institutions there are clear differences in course design and goals of dance training, depending on the philosophies that they are grounded within [18]. These differences often seem to relate to whether the institution emphasizes the importance of the learner’s technical skill acquisition – which could be considered a conservatoire model of dance education, or whether it provides the learner with a wider experience of dance as an art form, which can be understood as a liberal

arts model towards dance education. These two types of education model shaped today's tertiary dance education around the world. It is noted that the conservatoire models of dance education, which emphasize dance technique training, often tend to hold more traditional views of teaching with authoritative teaching methods; while dance education focusing on the liberal arts model has a strong history of learner-centered teaching approaches such as the use of the student's exploration of their learning. From what have been summarized in section 2, one can perceive that contemporary tertiary dance education in China attached great importance on 'dance technique training' based on the continuing influence made by predecessors such as Wu Xiaobang and the Soviet educational model. Thus, the conservatoire model of dance education is the mainstream in contemporary China.

Rowe and Xiong explain that tertiary dance programmes in China could be categorized into three education models: normal (or teacher-training) universities that seek to teach future dance educators, comprehensive universities integrating dance into an arts curriculum, and conservatory programmes training future professional dancers [19]. These institution types hold much power and authorities, in the eyes of most of the Chinese scholars, Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) holds the strongest position within the context of Chinese dance education [20-22]. The BDA's counterparts in other regions across China, such as Minzu University of China, Shanghai Theatre Academy and Zhejiang Music Conservatory etc., state-owned theatres and ensembles, private professional dance companies, and private dance schools and studios across China that are modelled on conservatoire dance training look towards the BDA for guidance. The leading force and exemplar of BDA and its counterparts in other regions of China sets the foundation of conservatoire-based tertiary education system throughout the country. The role of BDA is highly acknowledged by Chinese dance scholars, thus, the keywords of Chinese dance education firstly developed surrounding the training model of BDA.

The authority and powerful influence of the BDA in the Chinese context has been largely acknowledged and recognized by dance researchers inside and outside of China [23, 24]. In her PhD dissertation *Transgressing gaze: Personal narratives of four dance artists' choreographic practices in mainland China*, Chinese researcher Ruohan Chen summarized that the main discourses circulated around Chinese dance terrain can be understood as 'insti-

tutionalized dance genres', 'technique and movement focused ideals', 'product-oriented choreographic approach', and 'the dramatized dance choreography' etc [18]. These keywords played crucial roles in cultivating both performers and educators of the future generation and gave rise to the dominant pedagogies and philosophies behind the giant dance education machine.

3.2 Pedagogies and Teaching Methods: Hierarchical and Authoritative

The conservatoire-based tertiary dance education programmes usually rely on replication of dance techniques and content knowledge, which means that dance teachers under this context may mimic the models of teaching that they have experienced during the process of their dance learning. Teachers usually choose to pass their knowledge of dance from one generation to another with few changes in the teaching practices, in the case of China, the knowledge passing down could encompass methods, syllabus, and personal teaching styles etc. The pedagogies adopted in the setting of conservatoire training model, thus, can be hierarchical and authoritative. Teaching approaches of teachers under the context ask student to conform to the ideal requirements of the techniques delivered [25].

Authoritative teaching methods in dance training settings suggest that dancers tend to teach themselves how to teach by reproducing how they themselves were taught, yet they might have very little formal education in pedagogy [26, 27]. Such teaching methods can demonstrate the content knowledge well yet teach little about content pedagogical knowledge. Students may follow the process where they imitate their dance teacher until they have mastered positions, movements, and dance vocabularies. To sustain this process of imitation, students are under surveillance so that they do not deviate from expectations [28]. Types of surveillance in dance classroom including mirrors, teachers, and peers etc. Therefore, it is not hard to understand that the mainstream teaching style within tertiary dance education is hierarchical, in which the words of the teacher and the movements of the teacher are unquestionable. Therefore, in a traditional dance classe, the role of teacher and its impacts could be immense as in shaping future dance educators.

In the context of professional dance training in China, the teacher's beliefs and authoritarian pedagogy serve as discourses which could have a profound influence on stu-

dents' future practices as dance professionals. It is noted that within tertiary dance programmes in China, students are often directed to learn through 'cutting' and 'pasting' ideas related to content knowledge 'onto' their bodies and are directed to repeat this learning process to the next generation [19]. The rote-learning towards replicating technique and movement in dance education in China could lead to a dance classroom which values 'product' and 'correct answer' over 'process' and 'exploration'.

It is worth noting that describing the mainstream teaching and learning model as 'hierarchical' and 'rote-learning' could be critical, and some Chinese scholars might hold different opinions. However, in order to cultivate first-class talent dancers and choreographers, one can hardly ignore the quality of 'product'.

3.3 The Product-focused Educational Philosophy

The establishment of professional dance institutes in China and its main pedagogic method thus is closely relevant to shape and perpetuate discourses regarding the 'ideal dancing body' in the Chinese context. Through the systematic introduction of dance techniques, curriculums, and the training of dancers and choreographers, dance institutions in China offering both secondary and tertiary level dance education appear to produce and maintain discourses of 'what dance is' and 'who can dance'. Dance educators in China, such as Lv Yisheng and Wang Jie, agrees on the opinion that dance programmes within institutes in China are mainly conservatoire-oriented [15, 29], which implies that the hierarchical and authoritarian teaching approach focusing on replicating techniques and behaviours of teachers is mainstream. The dominant authoritarian teaching method is often accompanied by an examination-based assessment system, where the judgement of the student dancers' and student choreographers' performance and skills depends on scores. The examination-based assessment system could be said to have set the foundation for seeking 'product' over 'process' in dance education as well as dance practice in China. The assessment system, once again, is the continuation of the Soviet educational model and now considered as the main characteristic of the socialist country.

Within the different philosophies of dance education, it is argued that the product-oriented approaches are widely used in the settings of dance classrooms [30]. Product-oriented philosophies usually encourage students to

strive for the success of the product and may try to "match definition rather discovering something new" [31]. Dance education within a product-oriented philosophy could be seen as "assign movement studies and to critique students' presentations in class" [30]. This approach emphasizes the "quality of the product" rather than actually teaching students the "activity of creative process, which itself requires critical reasoning" [30]. Within the framework of product focused dance education, courses tend to promote the idea that the product is the "correct" answer and outcome, rather than promoting inquiry and encouraging students to experiment.

The product-oriented philosophy is the manifestation of examination-based assessment system. Jin and Martin noted that it is acknowledged that examinations have played a pivotal role in the Chinese education system, shaping pedagogical practice, regardless of the discipline being taught, and Chinese tertiary dance education is not an exception [22]. The standard of the movement and the 'correct answer' of the product is what the teachers attempt to pass down to their students. It is within the space of classrooms dance education and its result can truly happen.

3.4 Spaces: The Central Position of Dance Classrooms

The product-oriented approach in dance choreography can be seen extensively in the Chinese dance community, especially from the perspective of professional dance competitions. However, one should note that standards of assessing a dancer's skill usually root in dance classrooms, this applies to both the success of competition and the quality of talents [18]. For example, when discussing the connection of dance classes and the beginnings of the Taoli Bei dance competition, the former president of the BDA (1996-2001), Chinese dance scholar Yu Ping, notes that: "Taoli Bei is the dance competition specifically set up for the purposes of exchange and communication among professional dance institutes. The key thread for running this competition festival lies in the inner link between what constitutes the content of competition and what is taught in classes" [32]. According to Chen, Yu's comment above suggests that both the content and the standard to win the competition, embodied through a dancer's performance, ultimately hinges on what is valued in the settings of professional dance education and classrooms [18]. The standard to win the competition rests on the quality of the dance product, which is judged by

measuring and comparing bodies and techniques [24].

Classrooms as a public space where dance education happen are full of codes, traditions, relations, and discourses. It is in this space that the conservatoire-training system, pedagogies, and the final product can be examined.

3.5 The Evolving Value of Dance Education in China: Dance as a Means of Aesthetic Education

On September 28, 2015, the State Council of the People's Republic of China published the document entitled *Suggestions on Improving and Strengthening the Aesthetic Education in Schools* [33]. It was the first time a Chinese government policy suggested that dance should be included in school curricula, with a particular focus on primary school and middle school (secondary school). Many Chinese dance scholars and educators claim that this document could be viewed as a landmark moment for the development of Chinese dance education [34]. In 2020, the General Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued *Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era*, his document clarified the direction and importance of aesthetic education, and further stressed that by 2022, school aesthetic education will have made a breakthrough, relevant courses will have been comprehensively offered and remarkable progress will have been made in education and teaching reform [35].

During the long history of China, dance was never taught as a subject in schools, which means dance in general education, the other line of dance education in China, is highly overlooked for a long time. This imbalance is broken by the new policy issued by the Ministry of Education in China in 2022, which added the subjects of dance, drama and television into curriculum of compulsory education periods from first grade to nine grade. The so-called 'New Three Subjects' (新三科) and the promotion of 'quality-oriented education' and aesthetic education in schools surely bring and will further re-organize the current dance curriculum and mainstream pedagogies in tertiary dance education.

This change will bring further impact of how dance education in China transforms into general education and accessible to all students instead of solely focusing on future professional dancers. In relation to tertiary dance

education in China, the transformation and its further trend across China will bring issues and challenges of cultivating dance teachers and educators who are competent to teach dance in contexts of primary and secondary schools.

4 Conclusion

This article summarized five keywords and aspects related to educational philosophies of Chinese tertiary dance education by using the methods of literature review and critical reflection. The five keywords involved the conservatoire-training system, the authoritarian teaching methods, the product-focus philosophy, the central position of classrooms, and the gradual transformation to dance as a means of general education. These five keywords, in the eyes of the article, revealed the deep influence of Confucianism to contemporary Chinese dance education.

It is noted that in the Zhou dynasty (1122–256 BC), under the influence of Confucianism, students were required to master Six Arts (六艺), which were viewed as basic and integral components for a person's education. The Six Arts include Rites (礼), Music (乐), Archery (射), Charioteering (御), Calligraphy (书) and Mathematics (数) (Yuan & Zheng, 2019). Within this, music was a combination of music and dance together. Like the other five arts in Zhou dynasty, music and dance were also viewed as a political measure and instrument of education, and the status and function of music and dance were given unprecedented attention at that time. In Confucian theory, music and dance education were viewed as a way to achieve better personal development and for cultivating a whole person. However, on the other hand Confucius also acknowledged that music and dance education should, "follow the rules of propriety, and serving for the ruling class was an important function of music and dance education during the feudal society of ancient China" [10]. In other words, dance education was considered as a kind of elite education during the early history of China. Therefore, from the perspective of Confucianism, receiving dance education is something hierarchical; such implications also manifest in the opinion of product over process.

According to Lu, the principles of Confucianism used in Chinese schools and homes educate children to be humble, modest and obedient. Such principles have had a significant influence on Chinese education for thousands of years. In the West, however, children are more often

encouraged to be creative, autonomous and independent [36]. Lu argued that Chinese students' learning styles were very much influenced by Confucianism, which is dominated by rote learning with heavy memorization, in the meantime, Chinese learners were accustomed to learning passively and mechanically because they lack the confidence to participate in the delivery of different learning modes. By citing her own learning experience in high school, Lu also stated that her learning motivation was heavily driven by all types of examination scores, and this phenomenon has a close relationship with curriculum and pedagogy in China [36]. Lu's article separately pointed out the inner link of Confucianism and Chinese education in teaching methods, learner style and motivation, which is also demonstrated in tertiary dance education in China.

The association between Confucianism and Chinese dance education worth exploring in future research, and to begin with investigating the query, this article summarized the five keywords related to contemporary Chinese tertiary dance education for reference by citing scholarships both in English and Chinese. The transformation and potential of Chinese dance education in recent years showed that issues emerged in pedagogies, learner styles, art policies, and new curriculum remain to be discussed and resolved.

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