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Moving Identities: An Investigation of Chinese Oversea Dancers in London Based on Double Consciousness Theory

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Abstract. It is not uncommon today that cross-border exchanges of dancers are getting closer and closer under globalization. For those cross-cultural dance training, dancers' thoughts and bodies have been changed. This paper explores the multiple consciousness and identity contradictions of Chinese overseas dancers in the context of London. Applying Double Consciousness Theory to dance research strives to help more individuals to sociological focus on dance research and comprehend the relationship between the body and society. The ethnography methodology is adopted in this study and found that Chinese overseas dancers can better examine and truly understand China's national culture and reshape their identities. Besides, the contradiction between dancers and the inevitability of multiple identities in the cross-cultural context contributed to the development of British multiculturalism to a certain extent.

Keywords: Double Consciousness; Identity; Chinese overseas dancers.

1. Introduction

Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness enables individuals to perceive the differences and gaps between races. Until now, Double Consciousness has been applied more far-reaching and widely from a sociological perspective, which represents two voices that are internal conflicts with their identities. Students participating in international dance education encounter a world that is rapidly changing, and they move between complex social and political environments to gain learning experiences. For those cross-cultural dance training, dancers personally experienced cultural conflicts and two different dance educations. Their body includes two kinds of voices: the traditional Chinese and British dance bodies are intertwined. Therefore, this paper strives to answer the following questions: What are the changes and differences between the body and mind of Chinese dancers in the context of London? How do these differences reflect the multiple consciousness and identity contradictions of overseas Chinese dancers? What is the relationship between these contradictions and society? As the core of dance, the body is the construction of society. Dance training imperceptibly integrates social ideology into the body, and society shapes the body to a certain extent. On the contrary, the body is crucial to comprehending culture and society.

Previous works have focused on in-depth discussions on double consciousness theory in sociology. However, some dance scholars have found multiple consciousnesses of dancers in the cross-cultural context. Lucy mentioned that contemporary choreographers live in the "middle" space because of their own cultural backgrounds. It is analyzed that Akram Khan's choreography is influenced by Eastern and Western cultures. Kazak's classical Indian dance form is embedded in Khan's action vocabulary. Due to the cultural hybridity explored in Khan's works, a new identity is formed in the overlapping culture, and it is mentioned that the works exist in the "middle space". While few have used it in dance research, some dance analysis of consciousness identity is merely based on interviews and does not use systematic theoretical knowledge. Applying the Double Consciousness theory to dance research to figure out the relationship between body and society is novel for sociology because it is based on the irreplaceable body experience and personal data of dancers. This research conducted structured interviews with Chinese dancers in Roehampton University to explore the multiple consciousness and identity contradictions of Chinese overseas dancers in the context of London. Although the fieldwork conducted only for students at the University of Roehampton has limitations, as a cross-cultural study, it has injected new vitality into the fields of sociology and dance.

2. Method

Qualitative research is used for this study to achieve the research objective. Through interview and participant observation of data collected from Chinese graduate students majoring in dance at the University of Roehampton in London. To collect and analyze data in terms of interviews to answer research questions.

The participants are five Chinese graduate students from Roehampton University (see Table 1). They are from the top Chinese Dance Academy and have more than ten years of Chinese dance training experience. At present, they are 2022 master's students in MA Dance Practice, MFA Choreography, and MFA Dance and Embodied Practice at the University of Roehampton. Furthermore, as a Roehampton student, Participant Observation was also applied in this research. Following that, Combine the Double Consciousness Theory of Du Bois with data analysis to address research questions.

Table 1. Information of interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Major	Professional Chinese dance training experience
Cong Zhang	26	Male	Dance Practice	13years
Hongqiuye Wei	24	Female	Dance and Embodied Practice	11years
Jiayi Fang	21	Female	Choreography	11years
Rong Zhao	24	Female	Dance and Embodied Practice	11years
Yining Zhang	24	Female	Dance Practice	11years

3. Result

3.1 The Body and Mind of Dancers from China to the UK

Dance is a vital part of Chinese culture. Chinese dance is a mirror of cultural representations, which also symbolizes the national characteristics of the people and the identity of Chinese civilization. Similarly, Chinese dance education continues the tradition of cultural protection and inheritance, as well as taking Chinese folk dance and classical dance as compulsory courses for dancers. The framework of a socialist republic in China has produced a unique link between dance and politics. In a socialist China, dance serves politics with the transmission of national ideology. The Chinese social environment shapes the body of Chinese dancers with rich cultural heritage and forms special cultural symbols that are difficult to erase. The movement of the body in dance may be seen as the embodiment of history, existence givens, societal value system, and symbols.

According to the interviews on the physical and mental changes of Roehampton Chinese dancers, Hongqiuye replied:

“For me, there are significant changes in my mind, but changes of body are relatively slower because my body reacts naturally after long-term Chinese dance training.”

Eleven years of training in Chinese dance has stereotypical reactions to her body. “There is a rhyme in Chinese traditional training, which is a deep culture. She may have to set a model for everything first, do it, and then extend it. While dancing here requires you to truly feel yourself.”

The body resembles a sponge. It absorbs any information you provide and has the ability to make decisions on its own, albeit not necessarily consciously . Even though eleven years of dance instruction is common for Chinese professional dancers, they hardly realize the deep-rooted changes and ‘stereotypes’ of social consciousness behind long-term dance training. Bois mentioned that ‘the Negro is born with a veil’, they look at themselves with white eyes. His exposition of the veil not only emphasizes how the veil divides society along ethnic boundaries but also emphasizes the translucency of the veil. Their social existence is shaped and experienced from behind the veil . As Bois said, dancers wear the same veil when dancing, covering their bodies and minds. In addition, this veil is the identity that society shapes for dancers through their bodies and does not belong to them.

“I used to think I was a good body, a good imitative body. But I do not think I can dance. It seems that I only dance combinations and actions taught by teachers... However, learning contemporary dance will always create new things when I come here. Then even if I do not learn movements, my own body can dance and create new things. No matter what music I am dancing to.”

Jiayi, an MFA choreography student, told me that London is more inclusive, and she gradually finds herself. When I asked about her physical changes, her answer surprised me. Although she has more than ten years of dance experience, she can relatively consciously control her Chinese cultural body.

“After coming to London, I felt different, but it is not in a derogatory sense. I think my previous study in Shanghai was a key factor. Many teachers in our university (Shanghai Theatre Academy) have overseas backgrounds. I have known what dance education is like outside. So, for me, the differences are not big. I feel more comfortable creating here because you consciously know the differences between Chinese and Western dance.”

Generally speaking, in the context of London, the habitual memory of Chinese dancers' bodies is relatively more difficult to alter than their thoughts. They unconsciously carry special cultural symbols rooted in their bodies that are difficult to erase, but more importantly, they began to walk out of the insider framework to recognize and reflect on the identity given by society from an external perspective. When overseas dancers attempt to uncover the veil of society, they can find their identity and differences.

3.2 Moving Body and Identities under Discrepancy

Roxane realized that movement is not an all-encompassing mode of communication. The meanings of specific movements are culturally determined, and people from different cultures can easily misunderstand one another's body language and movement, just as they can misunderstand one another's spoken language. The disparity between Chinese traditional dance and western dance is undeniably the result of different dance training systems and cultural differences.

Rong told: “These differences are related to the training system. For example, our classical dance training system is composed of ‘Shen Yun’, which needs to be driven by breathing, and your body is driven from the inside out. Western Ballet, as their traditional dance, focuses on opening, stretching, straightening and standing.”

Hongqiuye mentioned: “I watched the video of myself dancing when I learned Limón technology, I found that my body movement mode was different from that of native students. Their body was relaxed without numerous norms or rules.”

Cong also interpreted: “Chinese students, especially students of classical dance, have limited bodies because they don't understand relaxation.”

Similarly, I observed that Chinese and Western students have different ways of movement and interpretation. Firstly, there are different trajectories. Chinese classical dance stresses a circle, and the body follows a circular track, which is due to Chinese classical dance retaining drama elements to a large extent. Whereas contemporary dance is more linear and seems to be calculated according to geometric principles. Limón technology also requires dancers to feel gravity and weight. Yining found it and said: “The body of Western students is straighter.” In addition, Chinese Dance pays attention to emotion. When dancers accept the idea of instructions and perform actions, they incline to think of the implied meaning. Contemporary dance focuses on the body itself and explores movements.

On the other hand, a person may view cultural issues as developmental processes when the existence of the person's repertoire of cultural alternatives is not threatened by other cultures. These contradictions enrich people's understanding of society and injected new vitality into the dance field. Dance works are like a big container, which contains all the cultural symbols of the body and integrates them together.

Jiayi talked about: “these differences and contradictions, especially in choreography, dancers need diversity. How to make it your exclusive style is crucial. These multiple identities are our great advantages, which have helped my creation to a certain extent.”

This is well reflected in the famous dancer Akram Khan who deals with cultural differences to inspire his audiences; His dance design adopts a mixed approach, which means that his personal origin and identity can be preserved. The cultural roots that embody and enrich choreography life are embodied in Khan's works. Culture may always be present in a person's existence, even if they are nurtured with more than one identity and are the consequence of hybridity. The dancer negotiates between stability and change. This flexibility enables dancers to embody a variety of choreographic styles and transform into multiple bodies within one.

Nowadays, people are moving and dancing in all parts of the world. The contradiction between multiple consciousness and identity is inevitable. Understanding a culture's perspective on its movement systems is crucial to comprehending that culture. However, in a country with a deep cultural heritage as Britain, the injection of foreign culture has also boosted multiculturalism a mainstream culture in British society.

4. Discussion

4.1 Identity of Chinese Dancers

The habitual memory of Chinese dancers' bodies is relatively more difficult to change than their thoughts, but it is precise because they jump out of the Chinese cultural environment for many years that they begin to realize and reflect on the identity given by society and discover identity and differences under cross-cultural conditions. These differences have also reshaped their recognition of Chinese culture.

4.2 Identity in the London Context

Double consciousness is the product of contemporary society. In the context of London, the multiple identities of Chinese dancers under cultural differences are the result of cultural hybridization, and their identities can still be preserved and coexisted in their bodies. These differences and contradictions not only enrich dance art but also make multiculturalism become the mainstream culture.

5. Conclusion

Chinese dancers have experienced multiple consciousness and identity contradictions in the specific cultural environment of London after being trained in the long-term traditional Chinese dance. Applying Double Consciousness to dance research, this paper understands the relationship between the body and society. The body is the construction of society, and the body also reflects the ideology of society. For Chinese overseas dancers, they have a better understanding of China's national culture and reshape their identities. For Britain, the contradiction between dancers and the inevitability of multiple identities in the cross-cultural context has contributed to the development of multiculturalism to a certain extent. The same contradiction makes us better understand the social culture and coexist with contradictions. In London, multiculturalism has gradually become a mainstream culture in this inclusive society. As an overseas dancer, how to transform the identity of the insider and balance two cultures and two identities is still worth rethinking and exploring in their artworks.

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