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Verbal Feedback Styles and their Effects in Chinese and American Ballet Classes

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Sing Yiun Ng

Thesis Committee:
Professor Jennifer Fisher, Chair
Associate Professor Tong Wang
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2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Verbal Feedback Styles and their Effects

in Chinese and American Ballet Classes

by

Sing Yiun Ng

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Professor Jennifer Fisher, Chair

This thesis explores the roots of authoritarianism of ballet pedagogy in three different cultures, and how different styles of verbal feedback in the studio are interpreted and justified. In some locations, strict or even abusive teaching is perceived as “necessary” to achieve excellence, while in another, it’s thought to be detrimental to dancers’ mental health. Evidence suggests that cultural differences can affect different teaching and learning styles of dance teachers and students. The focus on verbal feedback and reactions to it uncovers attitudes and opinions from both the dancers’ and the teachers’ perspective, through a series of interviews of Chinese, Malaysian, and American ballet students.

INTRODUCTION

“How could she have said that to me?!” One of my classmates was telling me how upset she was upon hearing our ballet instructor give her verbal feedback that her arms were not placed properly in a ballet class at a California university. The instructor was showing her that she should have rounded her arms more, and not be “too straight like a stick.” I tried her to comfort her by saying that the teacher noticed her because she has potential and wanted her to perform better. “Well, she could have been nicer than to say that to me,” she replied. I tilted my head and wondered, why was she so upset? It made me reflect on my own ballet training in Malaysia, when my teacher would yell at me after finishing a ballet variation: “This is trash, get out and practice more!” I was not upset at all after hearing it. Instead, I was more motivated to practice harder and to perform better, hoping that I could finally get validated by my teacher that I performed well.

Comparing my friend’s reactions to verbal feedback in ballet class and mine, I became curious; why did some dancers I met in America react differently to feedback than I did when I was training in Malaysia? Was it because of the cultural differences between America and Malaysia? Was it because it was a ballet class at a university? This led me to my research topic, how dancers react to verbal feedback in ballet classes. I decided to interview dancers in different location also gathering ballet teachers’ attitudes, styles, and stated goals in offering verbal feedback, and to investigate how personal resilience works for individuals. Influenced by my research, I also created a 30-minute choreographic work in which I played an authoritarian ballet teacher, while students reacted to that style with embodied conformity and protest.

My research questions were: What do ballet students say about the kind of feedback they get in the classroom? What can I tell from their reactions? Are the

differences in students' reactions influenced by their background/ home country cultures? How do the dancers describe the culture of their classroom? What do they like or not like about their teachers' teaching style? What are their preferred teaching styles? What do different people think the best way to teach ballet is? These are the numerous questions that drove my research. A list of questions asked of dancers and teachers appears in Appendix A.

My methodology included a literature search and interviews. I was interested in finding out about possible differences between the Eastern and the Western teaching styles, having chosen to interview dancers and teachers from three locations: the United States; China; and Malaysia. My written research focused on the topics of the history of authoritarianism in ballet culture and how ballet developed in the three locations that were chosen, including seminal works by Robin Lakes, Melissa Klapper and Emily Wilcox. My literature search yielded very little that had been written specifically about the history of verbal feedback in ballet classes, so it made sense to look for evidence of ballet and cultural attitudes in writing about pedagogy and to interview both dancers and teachers. The criteria for choosing my interviewees were: 1) Ballet dancers who have had serious ballet training and share a strong commitment to ballet, and who were between 18-22 years of age. These included dancers from dedicated ballet training institutes, or conservatory-like universities. 2) Ballet teachers who are training pre-professional ballet dancers and have at least 5 years of teaching ballet.

I have conducted interviews with 5 ballet dancers from University of Utah and San Francisco Ballet School; 5 ballet dancers from Beijing Dance Academy in China; and 5 ballet dancers who moved from Malaysia to study ballet abroad (this is because Malaysia has yet to establish an institution where dancers can study ballet pre-professionally). By conducting these

interviews with dancers coming from different locations, I could explore whether one's cultural background might influence their reactions to verbal feedback in ballet classes. In addition, I have conducted interviews with 10 ballet teachers who teach at these three locations about their philosophy in giving verbal feedback to dancers in their ballet classes. My interview subjects were studying or teaching ballet mostly in only one location. However, I was fortunate to interview some dancers and teachers who have experience studying or teaching ballet in both the United States and China. This interviewing experience helped me to bring more depth into my research about comparing the learning and teaching styles from the West and the East. These 30 to 45-minute conversations took place online via Zoom during the coronavirus pandemic era, from September 2021 – November 2021.

As dance scholar Robin Lakes states in her seminal article about authoritarian methods in the dance world, the traditional method of teaching ballet (and many other dance forms) requires dancers to be silent, and teachers to exert discipline in any way they want. The voices of dancers have largely been absent when it comes to reacting to verbal feedback except perhaps in memoirs. One of my goals in the research was to reveal the voices of dancers who have been affected by feedback in ballet class but did not have an opportunity to express themselves. I also interviewed a few dancers who gave up ballet because of the harsh feedback they received in class and the high-demand standards of being ballet dancers. I am grateful for those who were willing to share their dance experience with me. There were many dancers I reached out to who were so traumatized by their ballet training experience that they declined my invitation to be interviewed. I suspect they represent a large population of dancers who have shared this experience. By doing this research, I hope that the dance field can benefit by uncovering the ways that verbal feedback is given, from both the dancer and teachers' perspective. It can lead to

a better understanding between dancers and teachers, as well as developing progressive teaching methods in the dance field.

CHAPTER 1

“You have to listen to your teacher in the classroom!” This thought has been embedded in almost all dancers’ minds. Authoritarian teaching practices have a long history within dance education, especially ballet pedagogy, which can be traced back more than two centuries in Europe (Lakes 2005). Ballet grew out of sixteenth-century Italian and French court dance and emerged as classical ballet during 18th-19th centuries (Klapper 2020). Ballet is a dance form inspired by European court etiquette where traditionally female dancers curtsy and male dancers bow to the authority (ballet teacher) in the classroom at the beginning and the ending of a ballet class; just the way you would bow to royalty. Etiquette authority Judith Martin writes that the word curtsy comes from courtesy, a quality that shapes behavior in ballet class, to show courteousness and respect for teachers. In courts, the curtsy was done as a signal for courtship availability, and social status dominance or submission, in order to be successful socially (Martin 2005). Martin also characterizes the knee bend (*plié*) as deriving from a "traditional gesture of an inferior to a superior" (Martin 2005). As a student, I was taught that bowing, which in ballet class is called *révérence*, was a significant moment for acknowledging due respect for instructor and the art form. As dance scholar Melonie Murray states, *révérence* is also a moment for acknowledging the power relations between teacher and student while reinforcing beliefs concerning the innate value of the lineage of classical ballet practice (Murray 2021).

There are many published curricula and syllabi concerning ballet education. For example, The Royal Academy of Dance, Vaganova, Cecchetti, and French Paris Opera ballet are also different ballet pedagogy methods. As Murray states: “The methodologies of ballet training have developed from the early French masters with a well-established ballet vocabulary and connected to 18th century ballet masters such as Enrico Cecchetti and Agrippina Vaganova to a more

current ballet curriculum. American Ballet Theatre's National Training Curriculum still follows the foundations of ballet pedagogy for developing technical and artistic skills" (Murray 2021). However, the emphasis in published ballet class materials tends to be on the ballet steps and the body, not on verbal feedback to dance students from ballet teachers.

Many ballet manuals advise and guide students on how to behave in class to have a positive learning experience. Describing the culture of the traditional ballet class, dance scholar Susan Foster said the unconscious mindset is that the teacher in the classroom knows it all, and the dancers' job is to listen and follow instructions from the teacher without questioning. In an early 19th instructional manual from renowned dance master Carlo Blasis, an emphasis on deferring to a ballet teacher was emphasized. In his book *An Elementary Treatise Upon the Theory and Practice of the Art of Dancing*, Blasis advises: "To young people who are about to take dancing as a career, ...my first advice is to put yourselves into the hands of an experienced master." The message behind the statement is advising dancers to find a skillful teacher and trust them. However, the wording of the statement is questionable. Even though the master is experienced and can guarantee an outstanding result under his or her guidance, the question is how much should the dancers "put themselves into the master's hand?" From today's perspective, you might reasonably wonder if he would justify any action that gets a result, such as yelling at them about how bad their dancing is in an attempt to motivate them to do better. According to the book *A Manual of The Theory and Practice of Classical Theatrical Dancing* by Cyril Beaumont, "a good teacher... [should] possess the gift of imparting his knowledge in a clear and simple manner." This is as close as these early dance instruction manuals come to talking about teaching styles and how ballet teachers should give instructions, "in a clear and simple manner." This indicates that there has been a lack of publications about the way teachers

should give corrections to their students; what are the words they should use in offering verbal feedback and what are the things they should not do in offering feedback to their students in ballet classes? My research explores how feedback is intended and experienced, and when it is useful or humane.

History of Authoritarianism in Concert Dance

Dance scholar Robin Lakes' 2005 article "The Message behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals" investigates the roots of authoritarian dance pedagogy and perhaps paved the way for healthier learning environments for dancers and dance students by unmasking a destructive dance teaching legacy. Lakes mentions that the traditional authoritarian pedagogy method in dance education is influenced by militaristic pedagogy. "The German and Swiss gymnastic training resembles military teaching ideology which set the pedagogical model that became transposed onto American physical education and later influenced the teaching practices of concert dance" (Lakes 2005). Self-discipline and obedience are demanded in military training and may have influenced dance training in the concert dance world. As Lakes says: "Like basic training in the military, the dance teacher may have as a goal to break the student down in order to build her up in a new image or to fit her into a predetermined mold. The role of the student then is to trust the 'sergeant'." The statement reveals how much power dance teachers have to control their students without stating any limitations of what the teachers can do. This can be dangerous when students feel powerless and not able to speak up for themselves if dance teachers physically or mentally abuse, or in the worst-case scenario, sexually abuse them.

In December 2021, an article "Grooming and Sexual Abuse in Ballet: Why Dancers Are Especially Vulnerable" was published in *Pointe Magazine*, stating that accusations of sexual abuse

had been on a rise for the last several years. In a famous case regarding a former Boston Ballet star, Dusty Button, and her husband Mitchell Button, a former dance teacher, were accused of sexual abuse by five dancers in multiple states. “They allegedly used their position of power in the dance community to earn the trust of their victims, ultimately conditioning them for abuses, including rape” (McGuire 2021).

According to Susan Foster’s essay “Dancing Bodies”, ballet creates a culture of silence from dance students to show respect for the field, and its strict hierarchy of listening to the authority in the classroom is deeply ingrained. Many of today’s teachers have focused on ensuring that dancers and dance students are being respected at the same time. Dance scholar Anna Aalten’s article “Listening to the dancer’s body” explains that dancers are used to not speaking up for themselves, that even when it comes to pain and injuries, they try to keep it to themselves. “Dancers who systematically silence their bodies run the risk of meeting the boundaries of its malleability” (Aalten 2007). Aalten interviewed dancers who told her about being able to ignore pain, that they accepted pain as an inevitable part of their profession. This may negatively impact not only their physical health, but also mental health. Anthropologist Helen Wulff, who writes about the occupational culture in ballet companies, explains why dancers have this attitude towards pain:

Every dancer knows: if you want to be good, you have to suffer. For a dancer, the experience of pain is not only negative, precisely because of this heroic aspect. Pain can be a sign that you are working hard or that you are improving yourself physically. Therefore, pain is often even welcomed. (Wulff 1998)

A dancer who was being interviewed by Helena Wulff once said:

Crying if you were in pain was absolutely forbidden. When you did, the reaction was always: “Keep smiling! You are the one who wants to be here, if you don’t like it you can leave. If you want to stay, stop whining!” So, you simply did not dare to stop, you just went on. There was a time when I had terrible cramps, but I never stopped. Never!
(Wulff, 1998)

Feeling some degree of pain is a fundamental element in the life of all dancers. Most dancers are familiar with whispered complaints to their cohorts about experiencing pain or injuries in dressing rooms, but they would rarely or never tell their directors about the pain they are suffering. This is because there is a fear of losing their jobs, fear of losing an opportunity to perform an important role in a production, or just a fear of being reprimanded cold-heartedly by a person who has power over them.

Development of Ballet Across Different Cultures

While ballet started from a European culture, it has travelled around the globe. It continues to adapt and evolve to suit each different culture while remaining the discipline of ballet. The rote-learning often used in ballet classes promotes the practices of demonstration, instruction, and correction. However, every country has their own perspectives about ballet which results in different teaching and learning styles from dance teachers and dance students. Here, I describe briefly the way ballet developed in three locations: the United States, China, and Malaysia. I hope that comparing the way ballet exists in a few cultures will contribute to further discussions about the development of ballet teaching methods.

Historian Melissa Klapper, in *Ballet Class: An American History*, discusses the early history of ballet in America, including several factors that conspired to make ballet a late arrival to the United States. Klapper points out that ballet was an art form associated with royalty, cultural formality, and social hierarchy, which could be seen to conflict with the ideals of the new nation founded on democracy. Nevertheless, according to Klapper, ballet was present from the earliest days of the nation. Klapper explains:

After the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, several French dancers came to the United States and brought ballet with them to continue to expand American exposure to ballet in the early nineteenth century. In 1828, Paris Opera Ballet spent a year touring major American cities which also brought in members of Paris Opera's dancers, choreographers and teachers residing in America.

Ballet then began to become popular across America after more French teachers and choreographers, and later other Europeans and Russians started to reside in the United States to teach ballet.

In contrast to America, China is a communist country. As a result, the Chinese are used to following rules and commands from the leader and ballet seemed to easily attract rule-followers. Dance scholar Emily Wilcox explains how ballet was developed in China in her Ph.D dissertation *The Dialects of Virtuosity*: "Ballet was imported from the Soviet Union in the 1950s and consolidated in China. In fact, ballet as an elite art form associated with Western royalty and other rulers, managed to survive the Cultural Revolution of China" (Wilcox 2011). Not surprisingly, the discipline of ballet has attracted many rule-followers, and ballet became popular among the Chinese. When Russian dance teachers were employed to teach and design the curriculum for schools like the Beijing Dance Academy in the 1950s, an authoritarian conservatory training method was also imported.

According to the book *From Ballet to Modern Dance*, by Joseph Gonzales, a Malaysian dance scholar, the colonization of Malaysia by Europeans began in the 16th century and independence from the British came only in 1957. Gonzales' book mentions that classical ballet was introduced in Malaysia by Irene Simms, Signe Syme, and Mrs. Marsden, expatriate wives of British army personnel, who established ballet schools in the 1950s. Then, the Malaysian local ballet movement was taken over by pioneer Lee Lee Lan, who founded The Federal Academy of

Ballet in 1967 (Gonzales 2019). Since then, ballet has blossomed into a huge industry in Malaysia, and the students of Lee Lee Lan carry on the tradition of teaching ballet.

Evolution and Development of Ballet

Ballet dancers are expected to have self-discipline to demonstrate good behavior in class as well as to follow the rules and etiquette of ballet class. Dance scholar Melonie Murray describes the culture of a ballet class in this way:

A ballet dancer enters a spacious airy dance studio prepared for the ritual of daily ballet class, exhibiting a deference not only for the space but for the history and discipline of the art. The voices of the dancers already in the space are hushed in respect. The atmosphere is filled with the ghosts of dancers' past, ancestors that assisted in the dissemination of this repeated embodied tradition (Murray 2021).

In a traditional ballet class, dancers are expected to follow the specific details of ballet technique, as well as to follow a tremendous number of rules on how to behave in a ballet class to different extents in different locations. They include: how you place your arms on the barre; where your head should turn to when you come to the center; and no leaning on the barre, no sitting around and no talking. These are often the expectations when you sign up for ballet classes. However, some ballet academies have stricter rules than others. For instance, the Kirov Academy of Washington D.C, a pre-professional ballet school connected to the Russian conservatory tradition, prepares students to become the next generation of professional ballet dancers, according to their website. The Kirov Academy established a Code of Conduct for the 2019-2020 year-round program, containing 32 disciplinary policies for the community members to follow. Among the rules stated in their Code of Conduct are:

- “Exhibit respectful and courteous behavior at all times toward faculty, staff, classmates, guests, and visitors.”

- “Students are expected to choose their dress tastefully, respectful of Academy standards as defined in the Student Dress Code.”
- “Academy curfews must be observed.”
- “Maintaining a healthy weight is very important for all professional dance students. The school nurse will weigh each student once a month. When necessary, students will be cautioned about undesirable changes in weight, and remedial action may be taken.”

(From the Kirov Academy Washington D.C.’s official school website, accessed in December of 2021)

These are the rules students are expected to uphold. However, there are no guidelines for proper conduct from the instructors or how students should report any instructor misconduct. From requiring students to “dress tastefully” around the school, to having a school nurse to weigh them once a month, it seems like the school wants to control every action of their students to create a unified community, and an individual’s freedom is not encouraged.

Alameda Ballet Academy is a smaller private ballet school located in Alameda, California, which posts student policies familiar to many in ballet culture. According to the website of Alameda Ballet Academy, under the section of *The Discipline of Ballet Class*, it states: “During class, dancers are expected to be quiet while the teacher gives the instructions for combinations or offers a correction. Talking in class to your classmates, should be prohibited. If the dancer has question, then she should raise her hand and wait to be acknowledged by the teacher to ask her question.” The writing is in an authoritative tone, indicating perhaps that those dancers should not have their own opinions about the information given from the teacher. Asking questions seems to be allowed, but likely not encouraged. Dale Johnston, a professional ballet dancer who later became dance education scholar, states that enforced silence in ballet class

affects students' mental development negatively. "Students who are actively discouraged from using the fundamental tool of speech for clarifying their thoughts or regulating their behavior are thus dividing and reducing the effectiveness of their complex psychological functioning" (Johnston 2006).

When it comes to ballet's history of using authoritarian practices, scholars have started to note potential negative impacts, and more democratic ballet pedagogies are starting to evolve. According to dance scholar Gretchen Alterowitz, "moving toward a more democratic ballet pedagogy can fundamentally affect ballet in the classroom, resulting in dancers, choreographers, and future teachers who embrace less hierarchical models of instruction, creation, and performance" (Alterowitz 2014) While a student-centered classroom encourages collaboration and individual's creativity among students, it can still preserve the art form and generate outstanding dancers. However, dance scholar Jessica Zeller asserted that ". . . Ballet's institutional resistance to pedagogic change is not surprising; teaching practices that subordinate the student have long been considered not just inextricable from, but necessary for professional quality ballet training" (Zeller 2017). The assumption that authoritarian teaching practices are compulsory in quality ballet training are being passed down from generation to generation. This thinking affects the actions to adopt more progressive methods of ballet teaching difficult. In today's era, it is a progressive idea to use a student-centered teaching approach which embraces equality and inclusion. According to dance scholar Nyama McCarthy Brown, "Culturally relevant teaching provides practical solutions to address issues of inequality that often come forth when critical dance pedagogy is applied to dance education and dance studies in our classrooms." She explains that culturally relevant teaching includes the use of multiple frameworks to implement initiatives in society. These frameworks empower students by

acknowledging and adjusting to aspects of culture, race, class, gender, sexual orientations, or limited physical abilities.

Another aspect of authoritarian methods is the potential abuse of power. As Brown states: “these frameworks recognize the system of power that govern educational settings in the United States and understand that these systems do not support all students.” Increasingly, ballet institutions have started to produce their own statements that address their ethics. For instance, The National Ballet of Canada established a Code of Conduct and Ethics for their members to follow, intended to foster a culture of honesty and integrity. The rules of conduct are being renewed annually. Under their whistleblower policy, it states that:

Members are encouraged to speak up if inappropriate behavior is observed or experienced or when they become aware of a breach or potential breach of this Code... A Whistleblower Policy has been established to provide a means to raise good-faith concerns about serious improper misconduct with protection from reprisal. The Company also provides a method for reporting anonymously through a third party called ConfidenceLine.

This statement shows that they have a strong commitment to prevent workplace harassment and to maintain equality and inclusion among the company members.

In 2020, an article “The Maintenance of Authoritarian Pedagogies Through Tertiary Dance Education in China” by Xi Xiong, a lecturer in the Dance Academy of Sichuan Normal University, states that there is an ongoing effort to change regarding authoritarian teaching practices in China. The article examines the initiatives to support the reform of dance education practices in China including “sending students abroad to study alternate methods, developing international institutional partnerships and teacher exchanges, and the design of a new national curriculum that promotes more student-centered learning” (Xiong 2020). Despite the challenge of transforming this deeply entrenched traditional authoritarian mode of dance education, Xiong

insists that the dance educational reform is necessary for maintaining well-being of dance students within China.

As Lakes states, “Learners who are full of fear and intimidation are less able and willing to investigate, question, play, explore. and take risks,” This, she suggests, may not prepare dancers for today’s demands for a versatile skill set and may not foster an environment where deep learning can take place” (Lakes 2005, page 16). Some solutions to reform dance education mode of teaching suggested by Lakes include:

- heightened observation and supervision by arts education administrators of the teaching and learning climate in the dance technique classes and rehearsals at their institutions.
- renewed openness to hear parent and student feedback regarding possibly demeaning, destructive, or abusive behavior by dance teacher-artists and a willingness to intervene if necessary.
- discussion among dance educators and administrators about what constitutes a healthy and productive learning environment in dance training and rehearsals. (Lakes 2005, page 16)

Resilience and Expectations of Dancers

No matter where ballet dancer train, each one may encounter harsh words and demands in the classroom. Advice often emphasizes how they can survive it. This section looks at advice from a few famous dancers who have weathered authoritarianism in dance, to suggest the way dancers have often been told to adjust, no matter how cruel the environment. In 2021, Wendy Whelan, now the Associate Artistic Director of New York City Ballet, shared her advice during an invited guest talk by the Dance Department of University of California, Irvine. She said: “Try not to take criticism so seriously. How you perceive it, is that you are in control of. If you think they said something that's harsh, you can take what you want from it.” In the article “Darcey Bussell on Resilience, Dedication and Coping with Criticism,” by Danielle Woodward, retired

British ballerina Darcey Bussell talks about her love of dance and the key to a happy life. When she was asked how she felt about the disciplined life of a ballet dancer, she stated: “People think living a disciplined life is restrictive, but it’s not; it’s empowering” (Bussell 2018). She explains that being disciplined helps her to be focused and resilient, which in return helps her to achieve more goals in her life. In addition, Bussell advises dancers to use criticism constructively. Instead of wondering why you were being picked on by the teachers, use that criticism to help you take a step in the right direction.

CHAPTER 2

How teachers teach and how students learn can be strongly influenced by the diverse cultures of different countries. Education expert Hong Jian's 2009 article, states: "Learning style is the way in which human beings concentrate on, absorb, process, and retain new and difficult information. Most people learn in a variety of ways and the most common ways for any individual will depend on the culture" (Hong 2009). In my interviews, students and teachers reflected something fairly consistent about the culture of ballet in China, Malaysia, and the U.S. In order to find out about the culture and learning styles in these places, which could reasonably affect both student and teacher behavior, I turned to a variety of sources based on scholarly articles of expert and interviews.

There are many historical reasons authoritarian teaching methods in ballet exist now both in China and the in the West. Robin Lakes traces ways in which it has existed in Euro-American dance culture. She lists ideas that have circulated, such as the theory of the artistic genius always being right, and ideas that dance training inherited from the military. After quoting dancer experiences of intimidation from modern and ballet choreographers, Lakes states what "the embedded pedagogical message" is: "When dancers are being utilized for an artistic vision, their feelings do not matter. They are a distraction to the artistic process of the teacher" (Lakes 2005, page 5). It is a well-established norm that ballet teachers have authority over ballet students. Students' feelings are often not considered; it is only the pursuit of the ballet aesthetic that is any concern. "From the teacher's unchallenged authority, students assimilate the system of values and internalize the impulse to evaluate and rank their own and others' performances" (Foster 1997).

In researching the roots of authoritarian teaching practice in China, I have found that the influence of Confucianism is deeply ingrained and has greatly impacted Chinese society. According to the article “Reforms in Pedagogy and the Confucian Tradition” by Felix Ho, “A common perception is that the Confucian education tradition is exemplified by core features such as rote learning by students, the teacher as an authoritarian figure for transmitting knowledge to passive students to commit to memory without question or reflection” (Ho 2018). In fact, Confucianism was built on an ancient religious foundation to establish the social values, institutions, and transcendent ideals of traditional Chinese society (Ho 2018). The Analects of Confucius support the idea of students’ submission to authority, parents, and superiors of society. For instance, one of the famous sayings of Confucius is, “Let the emperor be an emperor, the subject a subject, the father a father, and the son a son” (Hong 2009). The basic rule is “Honor the hierarchy first, your vision for truth second,” This is why Chinese students rarely talk back to their teachers in the classrooms. They usually just agree with what the authority has said to show that they honor and respect the people on top of a hierarchy.

Another factor that may feed into authoritarian methods’ prevalence in Chinese education is a willingness to accept the role of attentive listeners. This is influenced by Chinese culture being a “high-power distance” culture. Social psychologist Nekane Basabe has published an article about psychologist Dr Geert Hofstede’s research on a cultural dimensions model that has become an internationally recognized standard for understanding cultural differences. According to psychological studies (Basabe 2005), Chinese students are very obedient to their teacher because of the culture of being in a high-power distance country. They accept and expect unequal power distributions. A high-power distance score indicates that a society accepts an

unequal, hierarchical distribution of power, and that people understand "their place" in the system. By contrast, a low PDI score means that power is shared and is widely dispersed, and that society members do not accept situations where power is distributed unequally. China is considered a high-power distance country while America is a low-power distance country (Basabe 2005).

Malaysia is a multicultural country which includes the native Malays, Indians and Chinese. From my experience as a Malaysian, Malaysian Chinese share similar cultural values as the Chinese from China. According to cultural dimension model researcher Kate Sweetman, Malaysia has the highest power distance of any country in the world.

This extreme division of power traces back to a joint legacy of the Malay feudal system and the influence of the British. As a result, Malay culture is very respectful of a complex, nuanced system of titled classes and untitled "commoners," and tends to grant much power to those at the top of an organization (Sweetman 2012).

So, from a number of sources, Malaysians may have experienced authoritarian parenting and authoritarian teaching practices. For the Malaysia Chinese, authoritarian parenting styles were imported from China to Malaysia (Gonzales 2019). According to author McClelland (2021), Chinese parenting practice is based on the concept of training children by being involved in their children's lives and showing a high level of concern for them. Physical discipline is acceptable to show that parents care about them. This is influenced by one of the Confucian sayings: "打是情 骂是爱", which means "Beating is a sign of affection, cursing is a sign of love." Chinese parents tend to express their love for their children by scolding or beating them, believing that it is a sign that they care about their children. "While white parents' parenting style displays warmth and closeness balanced with monitoring and control, Asian parents appear to show less warmth and

more controlling of their children. Yet their children often do just as well as their European counterparts” (McClelland 2021).

For Lakes, “tracing these roots does not justify authoritarianism in dance pedagogy but rather suggests the ideological allegiances that allow its perpetuation.” In her article, she compares the authoritarian teacher to a programmer, and the student is the computer waiting to be told what to do or think. Everyone would be treated the same in this analogy and different approaches to material is not necessary. In addition, she states that “militaristic pedagogy was transposed onto American physical education and later influenced the teaching practices of concert dance” (Lakes 2005).

With traditional authoritarian training concepts passed down to dancers from both the East and West, each individual may be affected by cultural differences and their own receptiveness to the teaching styles. According to Lakes, authoritative teaching practice fosters an emotionally abusive atmosphere, which dangerously harms dancers. This is also evidence that harsh practices are being re-evaluated in the West, so that they do not damage students. From my own experience and interviews, dancers in China and Malaysia often do not perceive they are being damaged. However, the awareness of “expertise at a high cost to the dancer” is gradually emerging in China. “Transforming this system can be very challenging, as it involves shifts to educational mindsets that are not only deeply entrenched, but also very broadly spread” (Xiong 2020).

Style of Feedback

Every teacher has their own unique teaching style, even within the most prescribed curriculum. Every student also has their own preferred learning styles and reactions, which may

be influenced by different cultures. In my interviews, both teachers and students at BDA expressed a preference for the teacher-centered approach, supporting what Lakes points to as “authoritarian practices.” One professor who teaches ballet at BDA, said: “In order to be successful in this dance career, you [students] need to trust your teacher. You have to be like an empty vessel and your job is to listen and absorb as much information as you can from your teachers.” According to an article by Hong Jian, a Chinese professor who teaches language and literature in China, the teacher-centered model positions the teacher as the expert of passing their knowledge to the student via direct instruction. In Chinese contexts, this may be seen as positive; not so for Lakes, in that she uses the metaphor for this model as a student being a lump of clay that the teacher models.

Given the still-prevalent idea that the teacher molds the student in China, the preferred style of feedback for students is direct, which means feedback without the need for positive reinforcement before a criticism. It includes an unfiltered tone of voice and observations, without consideration of a student’s state of mind or sensitivity. This is also similar to the idea which Lakes mentions that the student is not considered a person worth worry about feelings. This reminded me of a conversation I had with a male ballet teacher (Meng YeYe) who teaches at Beijing Dance Academy. With the stated goals of helping students to be good dancers, he said:

I like to be direct when it comes to giving feedback. For example, when one student did not do good during *tendu* exercise, I say, ‘绷脚!’[point those toes]. I won’t waste time to tell them ‘oh you did good but...’ I think being direct does not count as scolding. Maybe sometimes my tone sounds mad, but I am not. When I see a problem, I just give solutions.

I realized he used the word “problem” to describe students’ mistakes. I was surprised when I got startled by his words: “point those toes!” For me, that was a scary tone which made me immediately point my toes during the interview, even though I consider myself “fearless towards

being yelled at” because of my experience growing up dancing with a strict ballet teacher in Malaysia. I was startled even in an interview when he wasn’t talking to me. It made me question why he believes this tone doesn’t hurt his dancers and that maybe it does. This teacher continued: “My students and I spent a long time together, they trust me, understand that I care about them and want them to improve.” It seems that his students spend so much time with him, they might be able to “read” something underneath the tone. Besides, Confucianism makes it the accepted way: the students trust their teachers and understand their intentions are not harmful, but to “train” them to become better dancers.

Tong Wang, a former dancer who has taught both at BDA and, currently, in the American university system, shared with me some insight he has gathered from his experiences in both contexts: “One of the reasons that the teachers at BDA are strict towards their students is because one teacher is responsible for a group of students’ performances for several years. If that group of students performed bad during their yearly assessment, the blame is on the teacher, making it stressful for them.” Wang suggests that teachers sometimes use humiliation or yelling at the students with the intention of hoping the students are scared, and it will force them to work harder to perform better. Wang states that the culture of teaching dance at a university in the United States differs from the Chinese context in that American universities have in recent years tended to emphasize equity and inclusion for all students. Wang also notes that the university where he teaches now has a different system: “In the dance department at UC Irvine, every teacher rotates to teach ballet to all groups of students. There is not much stress for the teachers to ensure any group of students to perform exceptionally great.”

For many American teachers, being supportive and inclusive in the way of giving feedback to students is preferred. They believe that focusing too much on students' mistakes is not useful but rather discouraging. The style of asking dancers questions is meant to make them think, thereby including them in an active learning process. Professor A, who teaches ballet in the American university system, shared with me that her teaching philosophy while giving feedback to students is to be encouraging, which means not giving too many corrections at the same time. "I also try to use positivity, tell them what they have done correctly first, and then tell them what they need to improve, to have an overall positive finish." She also explains that ballet pedagogy nowadays has started to evolve from authoritarian teaching practice to a healthier, feminist teaching approach which does not include yelling and humiliating students. "I think we are moving away from that negative feedback now in the 21st century, because I don't think people want to be spoken to that way, nor do they deserve to be. I think we can just get much out of the dancers with kindness." Alterowitz also points out that "moving toward a more democratic ballet pedagogy can fundamentally affect ballet in the classroom, resulting in dancers, choreographers, and future teachers who embrace less hierarchical models of instruction, creation, and performance" (Alterowitz 2014).

Professor B who teaches ballet at the same institute as Professor A, also emphasized being kind to students: "I never want to be a teacher who is demeaning, discouraging or feel like the students could never meet my expectations. I want the dancers to feel like I am always supportive towards their dancing and being supportive to help them to develop whoever they want to be." As an example, she said she might say: "Well, you may want to notice that you have this habit of tilting your pelvis, so maybe these are couple of ideas you can think about to help you..." She continues to explain that, as teachers, we must treat students with respect even as the

authority in the classroom. “I don’t believe in scolding students. We need to nurture the future generation of dancers with love, patience, and care.”

In the book *The Art of Teaching Ballet*, dance scholar Gretchen Warren reveals ten 20th century American-European ballet masters’ teaching styles. She observed Janina Cunovas, a Soviet-trained teacher who gives classes in Russian method teaching American students in Tampa, Florida. Warren said she enjoyed watching how carefully Cunovas choose her words when making a correction. “I never get personal,” she told me, “But I do try to show that I care for them. I would never say to a student, ‘You have ugly feet.’ Instead, I might say, ‘Your feet are not quite good, but they can be nice if you use them well’” (Warren 1996).

Warren also describes Cunovas as having a sense of mischief, which was most effective at keeping pupils light-hearted, while at the same time making them want to achieve. She says: “Cunovas elicited giggles from a class of young girls when, one day, in an effort to remind them to think about their hands, she held her fingers out in front of her like claws and chimed, ‘Monsters in town!’”

I would have assumed that Russian teachers are mostly authoritative, yelling at students all the time. However, reading about Cunovas’s teaching surprised me, that she chooses her words carefully while teaching American students. It makes me wonder if she always teaches the way she did or did she adapt a different teaching style knowing that American students might be a little more sensitive than the Russian students she used to teach?

Students’ Preferences of Teaching Styles

China

Most of the students I interviewed who study ballet at the Beijing Dance Academy said that they were comfortable with the style their teachers used. They said that they prefer direct feedback without the need of positive statement before criticism. Student 1 shared with me that there was a time when Beijing Dance Academy invited a guest to teach a master ballet class. The guest teacher was a professor who teaches ballet at university settings in the United States. The student was surprised that the guest teacher seemed to be friendly and approachable, when she expected a “master teacher” to be another “strict teacher.” When I asked, “What is the main difference between your teacher’s style and the guest teacher’s style?” She said: “The guest teacher was very nice. The way she gave feedback always included a compliment first and then continues to tell us what we can improve. My teacher would just directly yell at us about the things we did wrong. The yelling scared us, and it made us focus more.” When I asked which teaching style this student preferred, the answer was: “Well, I like the guest teacher a lot; but at the same time, I am used to our teacher’s teaching style, and I don’t mind it too much.”

Student 2 had more objections to the style of this same guest teacher, saying the positive feedback seemed unnecessary. She said: “She looked like she was trying to be nice, and her compliments sounded insincere. I would prefer if she could just tell us what we did wrong straight away.”

After my interviews, I realized students at BDA seem to accept that strictness is the norm of ballet culture. They believe that in order to be successful, they have to endure the “hardest” training, which for them means being constantly scolded, humiliated or sometimes physically slapped by their teachers, even to the point that American students might call “abuse.”

Student 3 said: “I feel like in some ways strict teaching styles make us tougher as dancers. It can help us to withstand the stress more if we were to pursue a professional dance

career.” In my conversation with Tong Wang, he reminded me of one of the Confucius sayings: “吃得苦中苦 方为人上人,” which means: “If you wish to be the best man, you must be prepared to suffer the bitterest of the bitter.” In other words: “no pain, no gain.” The interview with Student 3 strengthens my belief that these Chinese students’ mindset was strongly influenced by the Chinese culture and Confucianism.

Malaysia

My interviews with BDA dancers echoed many conversations I have had talking to dancers in Malaysia. Malaysian dance students have similar preferred learning styles to the Chinese. They accept being submissive to authority, and many Malaysian dancers, including myself, prefer a stricter ballet teacher in the classroom.

Student A, from Malaysia, revealed that she is comfortable with strict ballet teachers and sees authoritative teaching as completely normal in this ballet culture. She attended the Kirov Ballet Academy, a ballet school in Washington, D.C. named for the famous Russian ballet company, which focuses on training young dancers to become professionals. Student A said in general, whether the teachers are at the Kirov school or in Malaysia, she understands her teachers’ intentions. “To me, how I see is that the more the teacher is strict to me means the more that she cares [about me]. She is giving her time, energy, and passion to correct me, because she wants me to be better.” Student A recently transferred to the Dutch National Ballet Academy, an elite ballet school which has a different style than the Kirov. She said: “When I first joined the Dutch National, this school is not as strict as Kirov. I don’t know how I feel about that... I thought that if they are not strict, I can’t improve. My favorite teacher is the one at Kirov. She made me cry multiple times and made me very scared of her. But I was able to push myself to

perform my best every time under her guidance.” Student A believed that to become a successful ballet dancer, she must go through the hardest training, such as accepting crying as part of her training. While other American students may also think that they train “hard,” most seem not to feel the need for being “scared” or “bullied” into doing their best.

Student B is another Malaysian dancer who prefers a strict ballet teacher. She studied ballet at a local ballet studio in Malaysia before transferring to New Zealand School of Dance on a full scholarship and later to San Francisco Ballet school. She said: “The teachers in Malaysia and New Zealand are stricter compared to teachers in San Francisco. I like strict teachers because personally I perform better under pressure.” Student B also recalled that her teacher in Malaysia used to yell at her and sometimes lightly slap some of her body parts, including arms and thigh to “wake up” her muscles. I asked if she felt offended by the actions of her teacher. She said: “Not at all. That is completely normal. The yelling and slapping helped me to engage my muscles, which helped me to improve. I am thankful for my teacher who constantly pushed me to become the best of me.” From our conversation, Student B believed that the best teachers in the world are normally strict teachers. Yelling and slapping are part of their method to train their students to become outstanding dancers. This is also influenced by one of the Confucius sayings: “严师出高徒”, that “strict teacher produces outstanding students.”

United States

When I asked American students what the qualities of their favorite ballet teachers are, they preferred teachers who are supportive and caring for their students. Student 4 said:

One of my favorite ballet teachers is very open to her students. She sometimes will come to class and ask us “how are we doing?” She gets real with us and asks about us as people. Sometimes she will even share her personal stories with us. Knowing that there is a person behind this authority figure makes us feel like we can work together, instead of a teacher that makes us feel we are working for her, and she will break us with criticisms.

Another American student used the same word, “open” when she described her favorite ballet teacher. Student 5 said: “I like that my teacher is open about listening to her students. I feel like I can speak to her and ask questions; I feel like I can be heard and seen as a valued person in the room.” Some other American dance students said that they like teachers who are encouraging and who provide constructive feedback after words of encouragement. Student 6 said: “I think that verbal affirmations from dance teachers throughout class, make me feel like I am being supported. For example, my teacher would say ‘Hey your pirouettes look great today,’” [and it] motivates me to do better. Because you can only give yourself so many validations, when they give it to you, it is definitely...good!”

Cultural differences affecting behaviors

In an essay (Hong 2009) contrasting the learning styles of China and the U.S., Hong characterizes the United States as an individualistic society. “The students in the U.S. prefer to work independently, are task oriented, and prefer rewards based on individual competition” (Hong 2009). People from individualist societies are more focused on themselves, and they tend to describe themselves in terms of their unique personal characteristics and traits:

A person from an individualistic culture might say "I am analytical, sarcastic, and athletic." This can be contrasted with self-descriptions from people living in collectivist societies, who would be more likely to say something like, "I am a good husband and loyal friend (Hong 2009).

During my interviews with dancers from the United States and China, I noticed a huge difference in responses to one question. I asked, “Tell me a little bit about yourself and how long have you been training ballet?” Four out of five American students were enthusiastic to tell me about themselves and their dance experience: when they started training, what they had

accomplished, what their goals and dreams were. The one American student who was the exception in giving me a shorter response told me ahead of time that she was in a hurry to get to her next appointment, and she would like to get the interview done as soon as possible. When I asked the same question to the Chinese students, most of them gave me a short response. For example, “It is my second year at BDA, and I have 11 years of training.” By looking at this discrepancy in responses, I assume that American students enjoy talking about themselves, sharing their experiences, possibly because they are in an individualistic culture while Chinese students are more collectivists.

Because American students are so often individualistic, they stress the importance of autonomy and independence (Basabe 2005). For example, people in an individualistic culture are more likely to value their own well-being over the good of the group. In addition, the use of the word “I” is encouraged for individualists, and they are not afraid to speak up for themselves. In American classroom, students want their voices heard and they do not like to be told what to do (Basabe 2005). Hence, American students prefer a student-centered teaching approach in which group discussions and participatory teaching methods are practiced. “Students ask questions in class, and they learn how to solve problems by trial and error. They practice over and over, expecting and accepting mistakes, until they become skilled” (Hong 2009). By contrast, Chinese students would rather listen to the teachers and follow their instructions to solve the problem.

Teaching Style Clashes

In my interviews, I heard that teachers with both American and Chinese styles of teaching ballet have their students’ best interests at heart, but they have different teaching styles. In all three locations, in fact, teachers spoke of their goals as providing good training and the best

futures for their students. Even though teachers sometimes have good intentions, not all students see it the same. The article “Re-visioning Teacher-Student Dialogue in Dance Education” by Rebecca Gose, examines how a holistic approach fosters open communication between teacher and individual student. “This concept of care—while not without its challenges and complications—is essential for the development of a healthy dynamic of mutual respect and learning between teachers and students” (Gose 2018). Sometimes, merely focusing on communication is not enough. The gap between what you mean to communicate and what is actually communicated is known as the Perception Gap (Gose 2018). Every dance teacher has their own personality and communication style, and every student has different level of sensitivity towards feedback. This is particularly true when ballet teachers from China teach in the U.S., and vice-versa. When small misinterpretations grow into large misunderstandings, it can ultimately destroy trust and credibility between dance teachers and students.

Misinterpretation of teachers’ intentions may occur when there is intercultural misunderstanding, for instance, when a Chinese teacher gives “direct” feedback to American students. While it can be seen as completely normal for the Chinese students, American students might see the direct feedback as offensive. They are used to receiving feedback that comes with a supportive encouragement before constructive feedback.

Er Dong Hu who trained at Beijing Dance Academy and currently teaching ballet at Bucknell University, shared with me that teaching American college dance students always requires encouragement first in terms of giving feedback. He said: “To American students, I always have to say, ‘Oh this is wonderful, beautiful, but...’ They are more likely to require this kind of positive feedback.” Hu thinks that most American students are more sensitive. He is

more aware of his word choices while giving feedback to American students and adjusts other aspects of his teaching style:

For American students, you can set a standard for them, but you need to give them the freedom to choose. For example, “I would like to see this, but if you can’t do this, maybe you can try that, just try your best to do whatever you can accomplish.” In contrast, to the Chinese students, I can say, “This is what I want, there is no negotiation, and I want to see it now.” They can accept this teaching style because they are used to being taught this way.

I asked Hu what he thought might be the reason that American students seem to be less receptive to strict teaching and harsh criticism. He said: “First of all, America is democratic. They tend to be more defensive to criticism because American culture focuses a lot on self-ideas and self-values.”

Tong Wang, who also has experience teaching in both contexts, would prefer to give direct feedback to his students at an American university, without worrying about their feelings. Shifting from teaching in China to teaching in America, Wang explained that he had to adapt a new strategy in giving feedback:

I like direct, honest feedback and [giving it] in the most efficient way, but the trick is, not everyone can take it in the same way. I have to “test the water” a little. If I sense that they can take it, I am direct to them. If I see some students’ reactions that show they are not ready to take it, I will be patient to wait until they are ready. Most importantly, my intentions are to help them to get better.

Wang also attributes the difference in styles to cultural differences.

In China, because of the culture and the rules of respecting teachers, the students are already used to listening to teachers and do it without questions. They understand their teachers’ intentions. It is easy to teach when no one asks questions and they do what you tell them to. In America, students think more freely and more likely to have questions. I have to make them understand my approaches are helping them for their own good.

Sometimes, a teacher’s intent may be to lighten the mood, but a verbal comment ends up landing the wrong way. In one of Wang’s classes, he said to a student: “Your arms are too stiff

and make you look like a scarecrow.” He also gave more neutral feedback such as, “You should put them slightly in front of your body and rounded a little more,” but the student looked like she took the comment as a personal insult. “I think it is important to make the class light and fun to yield better result,” Wang said. “I hope to make the students less stressful when we are constantly working so hard on the techniques. Sometimes, being able to laugh it out helps to create a fun experience, hopefully for all.” Unfortunately, not all students understand his intention, and he finds he has to adjust to the situation. “It is difficult to please everyone,” he said. “I just have to learn to step back if I realize the students are sensitive and avoid calling them out.”

In my experience, there is a culture of bluntness in China where they say exactly what they see without filtering the words they used. According to an article comparing American and Chinese communication styles in multinational organizations, “In Chinese society, honest answers are a sign of respect, and you should treat them as such. Your attitude determines how you react to honesty; weak people get defensive, confident people listen objectively” (Li 2012). From my experience, there is a culture where calling people fat was a common topic to talk about among families and friends. When we met someone who we know reasonably well, instead of saying “how are you?” we say, “Oh have you gained weight again?!” For instance, every time I visit home in Malaysia, my families, friends, or teachers, who finally met me after a long time, they say, “Oh you look chubbier than the last time I saw you, you must be enjoying your life in America with all those burgers and fries!”

Teachers coming from the blunt culture have to change their teaching styles when they teach American students from individualistic culture. Not surprisingly, when an Asian teacher was just being blunt, and compared American dancers to animals, it was not popular in an

American university. Student 4 from America was frustrated about the feedback from the teacher, saying it was not helpful to improving technique. She said, “No one likes that teacher; he is very mean! When we were rehearsing Giselle, he would compare us to things like ‘don’t look like a whale!’ I don’t know what it means, and I can’t believe he said that to us. I don’t think he has any position to comment about us like that.”

CHAPTER 3

Surviving Verbal Feedback- Thriving as Dancers

Given the evidence in my interviews, it seems as if dancers must adjust to many styles of verbal feedback, and that cultural norms and expectations lead them to react in different ways. No matter what the style of teaching dance is, students are left to interpret verbal feedback and cope with any negative self-evaluation, and feelings about what sounds discouraging. The question is: should they have to?

Usefulness of Verbal Feedback

As dance psychologist Linda Hamilton points out, “to improve in anything, we need feedback to know what is working and what isn’t.” Dance teachers are responsible to provide constructive feedback to their students with the intention of helping them to improve dancing technically and artistically. Dance scholar Elizabeth Gibbons reiterates this point: “Feedback is one of the most important factors in successful and efficient skill acquisition. It refers to the information, judgment, or correction given to a student about his or her performance of a task. Performance improves faster with feedback than without it” (Gibbons 2004). Feedback is meant to relay information and motivate dancers, but it seems clear that the tone and content of feedback can relay more than that. Gibbons labels two forms of feedback: corrective and ambiguous. While corrective feedback includes statements that identify errors and provide solutions, ambiguous feedback is imprecise and vague. For example, corrective feedback would be: “You need to push off the back leg to complete the turn,” versus ambiguous feedback: “Do it again. Ok thank you, next!” When verbal feedback includes negative judgement by the teacher, it can become dismissive, and the student may hear not just instructions about how to dance better, but “You look bad. This is trash.”

According to communication expert Joseph Grenny, “Criticism, no matter what you called it—constructive criticism, critique, feedback, it’s often interpreted as a threat to two psychological needs: safety (perceived physical, social, or material security) and worth (a sense of self-respect, self-regard, or self-confidence)” (Grenny 2019). While negative verbal feedback can be on the spectrum from the less intense to downright harsh, such as “This looks bad,” to “You are an idiot,” any critical feedback can feel traumatic to some people. In my interviews, I assumed that those who received the meanest criticism were likely to feel worse than those who received gentler comments. Surprisingly, some dancers who received less intense comments reported being just as overwhelmed. As Grenny says, reception of criticism can provoke shame and fear because we live with an undercurrent terror that if we are not good enough, we are not worthy. The instinct is to be defensive and combative to the feedback, says Grenny. Yet in my interviews, this does not seem to be true in the Chinese context.

For Hamilton, “Technique or performance-related comments are different from remarks about your body, the latter will probably hurt more, even if they’re intended to help you.” If it is a technique-related criticism, she advises students should not take the criticism personally, a strategy suggested many times in dancer advice literature such as *Pointe Magazine*, *Dance Magazine* and many scholarly articles and books from professionals. From my interviews, it seemed helpful for dancers to have a mutual understanding and trust between them and their teachers.

How Dancers Cope with Criticism

Having a supportive family is one of the common responses from dancers when they were asked how they cope with hurtful feelings from negative criticism. Student A, from Malaysia, said that talking to her parents helped her to heal mentally whenever she felt stressed out and sad about the harsh feedback, she received from her dance teachers. She said: “I love

talking to my parents. Whenever I am sad, I do really need to talk to them.” She also explained that crying sometimes helped her to let it out and she was able to bounce back from feeling devastated of the criticism she received, to feeling motivated to work harder. “I have to be very honest; I just like to cry. I don’t deal with stress well. I cry a lot; I don’t know why. But crying helps me to feel better, like to let it all out. Then, I was motivated again to dance my heart out.”

When I asked if she ever considered herself a resilient person, she nodded. She said:

I think I am [a resilient person] and I think most of my resilience comes from my parents. I remember I would always complain to my parents and say, “I am so tired today” or “today my teacher said this.....and I am crying,” something like that. They know how hard my teacher is on me, but they always teach me not to talk bad about someone.

I realized the reaction from the parents is strongly tied to the influence of the Chinese culture. According to cultural educator Frances McClelland, parents from America, an individualistic culture, teach their kids to speak up for themselves. But for the Chinese collectivist culture which emphasizes harmonious relationships with others, children rarely talk back to people especially parents or teachers, in order to avoid conflict. “Emotional expression is considered harmful to one’s relationship and children are encouraged to avoid it. It will reward conformity to society’s expectations for propriety and harmony” (McClelland 2021).

Student A also stated that not wanting to disappoint her parents is one of the reasons that she never gives up on pursuing her goals in dance even though the teacher was mean to her and made her suffer mentally as well as physically. In some ways, she said, it motivates her to be resilient in receiving harsh feedback from her teacher. She said:

I feel like I had such a good relationship with my parents, and most of the time I tried really hard because I do not want to disappoint them, but not that they will be disappointed. They have done so much for me, and I want to “double my hard work” so that I can give more back to them.

Student A's response reveals that she is respectful and grateful for her parents and wants to pay them back for their sacrifices. This reminded me that her attitudes are influenced by the concept of filial piety, which remains a central of Confucian social ethics. It is defined by the attitude of obedience, devotion, and care toward one's parents (Ho 2018).

In my interviews, Chinese students willingly accepted the role of listener as they learned to dance, whereas American students did not always believe that the teacher knew everything. In my interviews with American students, one of the methods which helped them to cope with negative criticism is to filter out some comments from their teachers. For instance, Student 6 from America is the one who was upset about the Asian teacher comparing them to animal, such as "don't be like whales." When I asked her if she considered herself resilient, she said: "I think of myself as resilient, like at the end of the day, I like to think about it or I write it down and I try to work it out myself. Usually at the end of the process, I feel much better." However, she continues to explain that it is difficult to face the teacher who compared them to animals. "But with that Asian teacher, it was hard. Because you know that you will be called something mean again the next day, so it was hard to block that out. In general, yes, I think I am resilient." In addition, she said that she did not have to take in whatever the teacher has to say:

By the end of the rehearsal process, he can call me whatever he wants, I don't care. I am going to keep doing it my way, or I will try to do whatever he tells me only if he says something constructively and nice. If he says stupid stuff, well, I don't need to listen to that.

Almost all dancers responded that they considered themselves resilient in receiving negative criticism from teachers. I wonder if this is because all of them think that being resilient is a good quality, and they only want to show the good side of them during our interviews to impress me. In Student 6's case, it was contradicting when she insisted that she considered

herself resilient, but also said that it was difficult for her to receive feedback from that teacher. From my understanding, she can be resilient only if the feedback is less intense and her instinct is to be defensive and be resentful towards the overwhelming feedback she received. This behavior may be affected by the individualist culture surrounding her which sees everyone as equal including their teachers, so that they do not feel the need to impress or even listen to their teachers.

I came to this research assuming that all dancers need resilience in receiving criticism from teachers and found that the Chinese students I interviewed see it as normal to receive harsh treatment from their teachers. Another example of a dance student from China who received much intense feedback was shared by Student 1 when she said: “In China, most of the prestigious dance schools require their dancers to maintain the image of the ideal ballet body which is lean and tall, with long limbs and neck.” According to Professor Hu, who taught in China and currently teaches American students: “During the Cultural Revolution in China, government officials visited elementary and middle schools to choose dancers by look and body type. Hence, students who are selected into the school, are already supposed to have the dancers’ body.” Student 1 explained that her school too, especially the ballet department, attached great importance to maintaining a certain weight. She said: “My teacher used to tell me ‘I don’t understand why you would allow yourself to look this fat, can’t you see yourself being this fat? I don’t understand why you haven’t start to lose weight yet’.” It surprised me when Student 1 giggled after she finished her sentence. It could have been nervous laughter, but to me, she didn’t seem to be bothered by the comment; she seemed relaxed and thought it was a common thing in her school to be called fat. I asked if she thinks herself as resilient and she said: “I am [resilient]. The thing is it is hard for me to get hurt by harsh verbal feedback. I would get more hurt if the

teacher did not say anything to me, which means I am not getting noticed.” Student 1 also said that they understand their teachers’ intentions, which is not trying to personally attack them, which makes them not susceptible to harsh criticism. “My teacher just wants to motivate us to be in our best shape. It is true that ballet companies will only hire dancers who have that perfect skinny body.”

Student 2 who is a classmate of Student 1, had a similar reaction about being called fat by her teacher. Following the interview with Student 1, I asked Student 2 what she thought about the criticism that her teacher called someone fat. She immediately widened her eyes and laughed hysterically. “I thought it was funny when you say ‘calling someone fat’ is labeled as criticism. In here, teachers calling students fat is not even considered as criticism. There are a lot worse than that.” When I asked if she could tell me more about the feedback she received from her teacher, she said: “My teacher likes to say ‘Stop sticking your butt out like a duck! Don’t you bring a brain today? If you ever try like this in real life, you will end up homeless.’” She also mentioned that there were times when the class performed badly, and her teacher was so mad, she just walked out of the classroom. Her teacher also used to slap students brutally on the chest, thigh, and arms. Student 2 said: “Well, all these behaviors are pretty common from our teachers. Sometimes, we were so used to their daily actions, and we were eventually numb to it. I guess it makes us tough to endure the future hardships in real life.”

To summarize, one set of did not complain about being yelled at, the other spoke of their feelings and unfairness of insults. It made me wonder, should verbal feedback be censored and controlled?

Advice from Professionals

Psychology researcher Courtney Ackerman defines resilience as mental toughness, or the ability to “bounce back” in the face of failure. It includes being optimistic and self-confident, allowing people to face defeat with a focus on what they can learn and gain from the experience.

Resilience is that ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. Rather than letting failure overcome them and drain their resolve, they find a way to rise from the ashes (Ackerman 2022).

Resilience makes dancers not easily get crushed by criticisms, even harsh comments from their teachers or peers; it can also help them recover from setbacks. In addition, resilient dancers are more likely to view negative comments as a welcome challenge and are motivated to push themselves to work harder. “Individuals who score highly for optimism and positive self-esteem are more likely to achieve their goals, score good grades and recover quickly from surgery” (Mead 2022).

Building resilience in face of criticism is an important quality to have for dancers, to help them distance themselves from the risk of suffering mental health issues. Sometimes, dancers themselves can be their own enemy. Because your art is your body, if dance isn’t working, it is you that isn’t working. It can be a dangerous place for dancers to be. It is common when dancers strive for perfection, to criticize themselves constantly. “Excessive self-criticism can sabotage your goals by making you push through pain or hate everything you do. After a while, this often leads to depression and injuries” (Hamilton 2011).

Advice for Dancers

There are many ways to build resilience, including positive self-talk, and developing a growth mindset to handle criticism with maturity and positivity. While my evidence shows that

strategies for resilience might be more needed in American students, Chinese students may benefit too. Even though the blunt style is accepted by many in Chinese culture, sensitivity may be hidden. The strategies I explore here would work in either context.

Self-talk is generally thought to be a mix of conscious and unconscious beliefs and biases that we hold about ourselves and the world generally, with unconscious cognitive processes influencing our behavior in ways we don't realize (Chopra 2012). Practicing positive self-talk is one of the great strategies for dancers to bounce back when they face disappointment from criticism. Dance graduate student Christine Gerena's 2015 thesis mentions "if you think it, it will happen." She ran a small group to talk about resilience and distributed surveys to dancers on how often they used positive self-talk during their training, suggesting that the practice of positive self-talk correlates with improved performance. Furthermore, Chopra (2012) found that providing students with effective strategies to turn negative self-talk into positive self-talk enabled them to successfully transform their negative thought processes. When dancers practice positive self-talk, Chopra and Gerena suggest it will assist them to boost their self-confidence which in return to help them to build resilience in the face of negative criticism.

Even in cultures where blunt communication is the norm, positive self-talk can be useful. In our interview, Student B from Malaysia who is used to blunt culture mentioned that practicing positive self-talk has helped her to approach challenges, including combating remarks about her body with a more optimistic mindset. She said: "When my teacher pulled me aside, told me that I look fat and need to lose weight, so that my dancing can look more beautiful, I got hurt a little. But I keep trying to tell myself that 'it's okay,' and my dancing still looks beautiful. Maybe I just need to slim down a little more to look even better."

Psychologist Carol Dweck says “individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset” (Dweck 2016). Dancers who have growth mindset believe in themselves and tend to achieve more than those with fixed mindset, which Dweck describes it as those who believe their talents are innate gifts and are therefore limited. This is because that having a growth mindset can help dancers to focus more on learning, and they are more willing to put in effort in things such as trying new strategies and seeking for advice from others. Dweck also explained the reasons that why people have fixed mindset triggers: “When we face challenges, receive criticism, or fare poorly compared with others, we can easily fall into insecurity or defensiveness, a response that inhibits growth” (Dweck 2016). When dancers learn how to reinforce growth mindset, such as admitting errors and seeking feedback, they can see feedback as learning tool and make the most out of verbal feedback. They can also capitalize on setbacks to move forward effectively, which can help them to succeed in achieving their goals.

Advice for teachers

The intention of dance teachers in general is to help dancers to perform their best and to achieve their goals in dance. Evidence from both dancers and psychologists shows that the teacher’s choice of words and tone can have an effect beyond conveying technical or artistic information, and every student may have a different level of resilience. Hence, dance teachers could benefit from training on how to respect dancers beyond their physical capacities. As my examples show, cultural backgrounds can affect students’ responses, and both teachers and students can adjust to different teaching and learning styles.

CONCLUSION

All in all, I have explored the roots of authoritarianism of ballet pedagogy in different cultures, and how authoritative teaching can be accepted or not, being perceived as “necessary” in one place, and detrimental to dancers’ mental health in another. Evidence also suggests that cultural differences can affect different teaching and learning styles of dance teachers and students.

Growing up in a culture where authoritative teaching is the norm has strongly influenced my own teaching style today. When I first started out teaching, I realized I unconsciously mimicked what my dance teachers did to me. I used the same method on my students, including yelling at and humiliating them when they make mistakes, whether I was teaching American students or Chinese students who grew up in the United States. I was surprised to find there was a huge contrast of reactions from the children I taught, even though they grew up in the same environment. I speculate from the evidence that family backgrounds affected the Chinese dancers’ reactions to authoritative methods. I do not think authoritative teaching is necessary to produce a good result, though it can be effective. For instance, I would yell at my Chinese children when they failed to perform well, and they seemed to feel motivated to do even better. When I’ve unintentionally yelled at American children, some of them just gave up trying and performed worse than they did before. Based on my research, I would think that Chinese families have instilled some of the Confucius values in their children, which results in creating mental toughness in them when they face strict teaching. Chinese parents would come to me after class and say: “Teacher, please push my kids more, challenge them to their best potential. Step on them if you need to during stretching, and it’s okay if they cry. Cry is good.” This mindset is

heavily influenced by the Confucius saying of “严师出高徒,” which means “outstanding pupils are to be brought up by strict masters.”

In discussing alternatives to “teacher-centered” methods of teaching ballet, Alterowitz says that the ballet community, especially in America, is shifting towards a feminist ballet pedagogy in this twenty-first century (Alterowitz 2014). I personally think that giving direct and honest feedback, without have to worry about students’ feelings, would be more beneficial in students’ improvement. It seems more efficient using the direct approach, giving more time for corrections, rather than using the time to add words of encouragement before corrections. Strict, direct approach worked on me, and I have survived it to become the dancer I am today.

However, I have acknowledged that I cannot treat my students the way I was being treated back then, because we are in the age where equality and inclusion are being emphasized. As I do not think that harsh teaching guarantees outstanding performance, I would also like to explore teaching methods that embrace the two qualities of equality and inclusion. In the American context, authoritative teaching may negatively affect students’ mental health and I think it should not be allowed. As Lakes says:

The effects of the “hidden” curricular agendas in authoritarian classrooms and rehearsal rooms are great. These messages have the potential to create fear, anxiety, stress, or lack of affect in dancers, which does not foster an environment where deep learning can take place. Learners who are full of fear and intimidation are: less able and willing to investigate, question, play, explore, and take risks. (Lakes 2005, page 16)

However, I wish all students could be less sensitive in the face of criticism, and that they could welcome criticism with an open-minded mindset. To me, that “scarecrow” comment should not be a big deal, and I wish they could instead focus on the technical feedback to use it as a motivation to work harder for better performance. I aspire to become a teacher who is supportive of my students, a teacher who they can trust, and an approachable teacher who students can come

to anytime they have questions. But at the same time, I wish I could always use the direct approach in giving feedback to students, even to the extent that some American students would call “harsh teaching.”

I see authoritative teaching as a spectrum where physically abusing students and making students cry is on one end, while being totally relaxed is on the other. My goal is to find a good balance between “too strict” and “too lenient,” and be able to stay true to myself in using the teaching approach I would like to use. As a teacher just starting out, I must admit that it is challenging for me to achieve this goal. For one thing, I have received pressure from Chinese parents who like the idea of strict teaching and want me to be the meanest teacher possible, to “step on their children” to produce good results, while American students just want to have fun in my dance classes. Neither extreme is the teacher I want to be. In my previous chapter, I mentioned about some teachers who have to get used to the “sensitive” reactions of American students and make pedagogical changes for practical reasons, without really believing there’s any reason to. Tong Wang, who teaches ballet students in China and America, agreed that he also uses different approaches when it comes to teaching Chinese and American students. In my perspective, having trust between teachers and students is crucial to work together towards the same goal. I want students to trust and understand that my intention for them is helping them to improve and to become the best dancer they can be. It is never about destroying dancers’ feelings and ignoring sensitivity to get the most efficient training. My thesis research has helped me to be better equipped with knowledge to know my students have varying levels of motivation, resilience, and talent, and ultimately, they can have very different goals.

I want to be knowledgeable about my students' goals and try to support them in achieving their goals. At the same time, I want to get better in sensing who “can take it”, and who “cannot take it.” Maybe I would be stricter to Chinese students because I know that they can take it fine just like BDA students do. For American students, I would treat them nicer because some of them “can’t take it.” For instance, I would honestly tell the Chinese students that what they did look bad and require them to repeat until they get it right; I would have to filter my words choice a little while giving feedback to American students and adding positive words of encouragement is always a good idea for them. I do not believe that one way is better than the other, but I do believe that cultural background can heavily affect students’ learning preferences and motivate them in different ways. Today, I no longer use yelling as a part of my teaching. Instead, I patiently offer explanations when I need to. It is no longer about blaming them when they do wrong but looking at myself on how to keep improving in this art of teaching ballet.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

Questions for teachers

1. What is your philosophy when it comes to giving feedback to dancers?
2. How much do you think about the words you use when you give dancers feedback?
3. Were you ever insulted or belittled as you trained? How was your training like? Did you pass down what you were taught?
4. Have you discovered ways that work best when it comes to verbal feedback?
5. What kind of feedback do you think motivates dancers most to improve?
6. Do you ever worry about hurting feelings as you teach? Why or why not?
7. Do you see colleagues who teach the way you do? Do you ever witness ballet teachers who are different, maybe more old-fashioned?"
8. What do you want for your students ultimately?
9. Does it matter to me if they become professional dancers/ future teachers? Keep studying ballet
10. How would you describe your investment/ your hopes/ your wish in these students?

Questions for Students

1. How long have you been training? What is your goal in ballet?
2. Tell me about the atmosphere of your ballet classes—are they very formal, or casual? Are there lots of rules? Are you allowed or encouraged to ask questions?
3. What are your expectations about feedback when you go into a ballet class?
4. Can you give me an example of positive feedback (from teachers) you’ve had in the studio?
5. Can you give me an example of negative feedback?
 - a. -What are your reactions to each?
6. Who have been your favorite teachers and why?
7. Are they the same teachers that you learn from the most? What do they do that helps most?
8. Do you feel supported and validated by your ballet teachers? How can you tell?
9. As you grew up, have you felt supported and validated by your family, in general? How would you describe the way discipline has worked in your family at home? What’s the style of your parents’ feedback as you have grown up?
10. What sort of feedback motivates you most?
11. Ballet can be very hard, maybe discouraging at times—do you think of yourself as resilient?” Is there a kind of feedback from ballet teachers that you think should not be allowed? (that “crosses the line” or “is never helpful?”)

APPENDIX B

Teachers

Professor A is a former dancer, who currently teaches ballet at University of Utah. She completed a BFA in Ballet from University of Utah, and the Department of Ballet of U of U invited her to teach ballet, pointe technique as well as Pilates-based conditioning as an Adjunct Professor in 2006. Then promoted to Professor/Lecturer in 2019. She has been awarded four grants and regularly sits on both College and School of Dance committees. She is an American Ballet Theater Certified Teacher as well as recently become certified in the Progressing Ballet Technique which works holistically to train dancers out of damaging habits and improve their overall stability

Professor B danced professionally for 27 years before transitioning to academic field. She received a bachelor's in science from Indiana University in Ballet & Psychology and a master's in fine arts in Dance from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is currently an Assistant Professor and the Ballet Program Head at University of Utah, ballet department. Other recent teaching includes New York University, Illinois Wesleyan University, and The Joffrey Ballet School. A certified yoga teacher at the 500-hour level, Christine continues to research somatic practices focusing on their application to dance technique and to promote wellness in dance and in life.

Students

Student 1 and Student 2 are both sophomore (second year) ballet students at Beijing Dance Academy, ballet department.

Student 3 is a junior (third year) ballet student at Beijing Dance Academy, ballet department.

Student A is a Malaysian dancer who started ballet when she was four years old. She went to a local ballet studio in Malaysia and has been doing the Royal Academy of Dance ballet examinations throughout her training. She has joined many ballet competitions nationally and internationally including Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Student A received a scholarship to Kirov Ballet school in one of the competitions and continued her training at Kirov. She is currently a trainee at Dutch National Ballet Academy in Netherlands.

Similar experience as Student A, Student B is another Malaysian dancer who started ballet when she was 5 years old. She studied ballet at a local ballet studio in Malaysia before transferring to New Zealand School of Dance on a full scholarship received in one of the ballet competitions in Hong Kong. She then received another scholarship to the renowned San Francisco Ballet school. Currently, she is hired as an artist at Ballet Theatre Malaysia, the first professional ballet company which established in 2021.

Student 4 received a BFA in Ballet, graduated from University of Utah in 2021. She is currently an apprentice with The Florida Ballet in Florida.

Student 5 and Student 6 also graduated from University of Utah, with a BFA in Ballet in 2019. They are both artist at Festival Ballet Providence in Rhode Island.