

Influences of Education Systems on Youth Counterculture: Insights from Mainland China and Hong Kong University Dance Clubs

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Abstract: This project discusses the impact of different education systems in shaping youth culture and students' personal development, as well as the role that street dance culture plays in them, by viewing the experiences of students participating in dance clubs in mainland China and Hong Kong universities. Looking at the historical processes of mainland China and Hong Kong, their education systems have undergone continuous reforms, and their effects are reflected in the different performances of students in universities in the two societies. Street dance culture, as a Western youth counterculture, was introduced to Asia and attracted numerous young people to participate. When it entered Chinese campuses, its original meaning was restricted or degenerated and a new variety of youth culture and identity was established. I hope this research paper can give a brief introduction to readers about student street dance in China and provide new perspectives and insights for studying youth culture and education.

Introduction

It was April 2023 when I first stepped on a stage at Peking University to get my solo ready to present in front of hundreds of people to qualify as a team member of the dance club. As an exchange student from Hong Kong, I had almost never performed alone on stage. During the

audition, the theme, dance style, music, steps and even the costume I wore were all decided by myself. Before that, I was given time to introduce myself and my work. I was not the only one surprised by this. When I chatted online with my dance club members at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and shared my experience, they expressed the same astonishment as I did. Members active in the CUHK dance club are relatively well-trained in group dance (unison movement) instead of personal style—this is just one of the differences between the two clubs on two campuses. In fact, after participating in the activities later, I found obvious distinctions in the thoughts of the dance club members, the operating mechanisms, and the status of clubs in the school.

Those significant differences I experienced in dance clubs' participation triggered my interest in understanding the student groups and cultural distinctions between the two places, Beijing and Hong Kong. Both universities are located in Asia, but they have completely different cultures of students joining a school club. Thinking about this more superficially, these are just distinct ways for students at the two universities to participate in extracurricular activities. But understanding this in more depth, what is behind the display is the influence of social, cultural, and educational factors on the development of the associations that have been established for more than 20 years.

Above all, as a street dance lover, the disparities in dance culture as well as the different atmosphere I felt in the two dance clubs activated me to explore the street dance

culture on these two campuses. Street dance is a widely known subculture that advocates freedom and unbridled ideas, yet when it is presented in school, its “rebellious” and “casual” nature is changed to fit the school’s traits. This research will investigate why two dance subcultures splintered in two regions and how they differ from the original subculture by considering school and society as external factors, students themselves as internal factors, and observing students’ expressions and organizations in these two dance clubs.

Scholars’ research on student behavior and associations has been inseparable from the discussion of the education system as a whole. To understand the diverse operating models, cultures, student performances, and thoughts in the two dance clubs, one must also seek to understand the education systems of the two places. This research will dig deep into the experiences and feelings of students under two diverse education systems to explore how the differences between the two local education systems affect the personalities and behavioral performance of student dancers, as well as understanding students’ autonomy and resistance under authority.

Research Background

Street dance emerged as one of the fundamental components within American hip-hop culture during the 1970s. Originating from the New York slums of the Bronx, it served as a means for

disenfranchised black teenagers to articulate their discontent and assert their sense of self amid pervasive social circumstances characterized by disparity between the rich and the poor, racial discrimination, and disparate treatment (Chan & Liu, 2015). The cultural concepts of street dance (hip-hop) align with the mentality and psychological attributes commonly shared among adolescents, thus facilitating its appearance as a distinct subculture among youth (Chan & Liu, 2015). Anthropological research also affirms that street dance challenges people's own limits, thereby proving the value of their existence (Li, 1984).

The dance association I studied at Peking University for this research is called Feng Lei Crew (FL Crew), which is one of the university's registered societies started in 2002. It aims to attract students with the unrestrained and free charm of hip-hop culture. A total of 8 dance teams, including Hip-Hop, Popping, Jazz, Breaking, Locking, Waacking, House, and Urban, have been established. It is open to all students, including international students and local students, with members ranging in age from bachelor's to doctoral degree students. All of the members can join the daily training as well as the performance. However, if students want to become team members to participate in competitions or further dance activities representing the school, they need to prepare a piece of dance for audition, the result of which is decided by each team leader, and that is what I did at the beginning of my fieldwork mentioned above.

The CUHK Modern Dance Society at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, known

as "Danso" among students, also has a history of more than 20 years. All students studying at CUHK can become members and participate in the activities of the dance club, but each year there is mainly a current team. It is formed by selecting student dancers during summer training to represent the school and co-organizing joint school performances or other dance-related matters with other universities. Due to strict rules and regulations, most active members of the club are local students.

The two dance clubs represent two universities situated in disparate regions, each operating within distinct educational systems that could be simply divided into two types: authoritarian and liberal.

Literature Review

In anthropological research, there are few studies that cover both street dance culture and student associations. These links are only discussed briefly, yet scholars' studies of street dance, counterculture, as well as education are valuable for reference in my research paper.

Scholars have emphasized that street dance (hip-hop) is a subculture full of nonconformity among Romanian adolescents that plays as a medium to present "self" and affirm their individual personalities (Petracovschi, Costas & Voicu, 2011). This may similarly explain the popularity of street dance among youths and its recognition as a subculture in my

research. The elements and the symbolism mentioned in the journal article also gave me insight into studying student dancers' movements to see the meanings behind them. However, their finding that young people engaging in street dance leads to detachment from familial and scholastic responsibilities does not necessarily apply to the student populations in mainland China and Hong Kong. When street dance entered campus, students' autonomy was subject to invisible restrictions, leading to different behavioral manifestations of students. Moreover, I found my research targets in both universities are contrary to scholars' descriptions because students were acting within the constraints of dance clubs, which was not completely consistent with the image of the counterculture.

Similar to the case study of Stuckey (1987) and Scott (1990) showing how African American music criticized and resisted mainstream groups, Rose stated that “under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion” (1994, p.99). The resistance through dance described here manifested itself differently on the two university campuses due to educational factors, and this is one of the fields I focused on. This echoes and relates to the dance theme that some students chose to express during the social movement period in 2019 in Hong Kong, while the school also adopted countermeasures when facing this resistance.

Andrew Kipnis has studied student subcultures and oppositional school countercultures in China. He has pointed out that there is nothing in Chinese education that can be called countercultural or even subcultural, refuting the idea that Hong Kong students' failure to comply with regulations or students in China cheating during exams could be regarded as a subculture and suspecting that subcultures or countercultures are more common in wealthy English-speaking nations. He used the word "articulation" to describe the processes by which expressive actions produce cultural identities (2001, p.474), maintaining that students in East Asia lack expressiveness in his observation. By comparison, he indicated that educational systems and cultural norms in East Asia may hinder or inhibit the development of countercultures. However, from the perspective of my own research on dance club students, I found that they embodied the characteristics of collective expression that Kipnis underlined. The relations between student dancers from both universities and counterculture remained disputable.

In addition, Kipnis's discussion of the system of Chinese "exemplary" authority (2001, p.487) mentioned by Borge Bakken also provided insights into my research to discover the restrictions student dancers faced and the compromised freedom at Peking University. The concept of educated acquiescence indicates that higher education is an anchor for authoritarian stability (Perry, 2020). This helps to explain why student dancers at Peking University receive more venue resources and financial subsidies than those at the Chinese

University of Hong Kong, as I will later discuss.

Last but not least, Bregnbæk's book *Fragile Elite: The Dilemmas of China's Top University Students* (2016) focused on the suicide problem of elite teenagers in prestigious institutions. He studied the influence of the transformation of the education system from test-based education to *suzhi jiaoyu*, "Quality Education," in China and the fierce competition mainland students face from secondary school to university. The views given in this ethnography helped me understand the reasons my mainland informants value learning and pursue all-round development, even in dance. Also, cases in the book show that joining extra-curricular activities is a way for elite students to maintain self-realization and relieve pressure. This provides me with inspiration in finding the meanings of extracurricular activities to students and the relations between education and youth counterculture.

Research Significance

The significance of this research topic lies in its multifaceted implications for various domains, including the education system, youth culture, and identity, which are crucial considerations in the study of youth and social development. These interrelated issues have garnered increasing attention in recent years, and this research is instrumental in comprehending the complexities associated with the experiences and trajectories of young

individuals.

There is no doubt that the education system exerts a primary and discernible influence on students' academic performance. However, it is imperative to recognize that the education system also plays a significant role in shaping students' personal development and their engagement in extracurricular activities. As Kipnis (2001) has noted, despite the broad scope of social anthropological research, it has neglected the study of school processes, whose complexity can provide much enlightenment. Within the educational milieu, students encounter implicit constraints imposed by educational institutions and societal norms, which significantly curtail their freedom and capacity for self-expression, particularly within the context of street dance clubs. Consequently, these constraints serve as a crucial determinant in the transformation of street dance culture from its original manifestation as a youth counterculture to a distinct form of university culture.

An in-depth examination of street dance clubs provides a firsthand lens through which to gain comprehension of the aforementioned impacts of the education systems in mainland China and Hong Kong. By scrutinizing the behavior of college students engaged in dance clubs, we can shed light on their mindset within diverse contexts, thus facilitating a nuanced analysis of the advantages and disadvantages inherent in the existing education systems as well as potential future paths. Notably, this approach allows for a deeper exploration of the widely discussed issue of academic pressure and its ramifications, further enhancing our

understanding of the complexities surrounding the mental well-being of students.

The development of early street dance (hip-hop) has been linked to drugs, money, and the underworld (Sit, Yuen & Liu, 2013), consequently contributing to prevailing prejudices against street dance culture after its introduction to Chinese society. Street dancing is usually regarded as an activity that is “ignorant and incompetent” and not beneficial to the body and mind, mentioned in the same breath as the harms of video games. Street dance enthusiasts who devote much time to practice will be regarded as muddle-headedly letting their studies slide, but when street dance came to campus and became an activity that brought together college students in a club, people began to hold different views on its culture and student dancers. In particular, the two universities in this research are relatively reputable as highly ranked institutions in Asia. The concept that “street dancing = poor academic performance” has been challenged by practical actions in this case. In certain instances, street dancing and dance clubs have emerged as motivating factors for students to exhibit diligence in their academic pursuits.

This research can guide us to delve into the intrinsic value and significance of the presence of street dance clubs among students instead of ignoring and mistakenly assuming that it has no connection with mainstream society. This investigation serves to challenge preconceived notions surrounding street dance culture and students’ involvement in extracurricular activities. Moreover, it offers a novel vantage point for future investigations

into dance culture, university club culture, and youth culture and ideologies. This research provides a valuable framework for reinterpreting the varied dimensions of university associations within the broader context of student experiences and cultural phenomena. As Quan mentioned in her research, “Hong Kong is weak in the development of multiple cultures, especially subcultures” (2013, p.5). This research hopes to provide inspiration to Hong Kong in catching up with slow pace of developing subcultures by depicting the phenomenon of dance and dance clubs in the younger generation.

Methodology

As a student dancer and member of both university dance clubs, my own experience has held reference value to my research. Having more resonance and basic knowledge of street dance helped me to be more aware of the situation and understand general terms used in the field. I could have easier access to notice and discover the deeper information of the studied groups. Also, due to my identity as a Hong Kong Diploma Examination candidate, my experience of undergoing the Hong Kong education system could be used as a reference and comparison to mainland Chinese students I met during my exchange.

Participant observation is an essential method in this research. I joined the Intra-Varsity Dance Competition on behalf of CUHK held by the Joint-University Dance

Association in Hong Kong in February 2023 and a special performance held by the FL Crew in May 2023 at Peking University. Through being a dancer and participating in the events, I gained new insights and perceptions, and built up close relationships with my informants.

Individual semi-structured interviews with 8 students from both educational backgrounds and dance clubs were conducted from December 2023 to April 2024 to study students'

experiences of joining dance clubs in universities and their opinions about education. I

approached my informants through the events of dance clubs, and each interview lasted about

half to an hour, depending on the responses informants gave. The interviews took place at

sites that informants were familiar or comfortable with, usually practice areas in universities.

Some of them were conducted online due to regional restrictions. This paper has mainly

relied on primary sources but also used secondary sources for understanding the history of

educational reform and youth culture dynamics, referring to archival research and academic

resources on street dancers of mainland China and Hong Kong students done by previous

researchers.

Dance Clubs under Authoritarianism and Liberalism

In my research, students of the two dance clubs have a uniform love for dance. What is clearly visible behind this enthusiasm is the difference in academic achievement of the students in the two dance clubs, which is closely related to the diverse education systems in the two places. Therefore, this chapter will discuss two dance clubs under disparate education systems by first introducing the two education systems: “authoritarianism” and “liberalism”.

Authoritarian Education in HK

“I missed three years of schooling” (讀少左三年書): I vividly recall the words of Pun, the former team manager of CUDanso, which left a lasting impression on me. This was her first reaction when I asked about the impact of participating in CUHK Danso on her. From her reply, I seem to taste the subtle conflict or contradiction between dancing and learning for a student dancer. I tried to explore with her the reasons why she gave up her studies so easily and readily for “extracurricular activities.”

Pun's desire to participate in university Danso can be traced back to middle school. At that time, there was no club for learning street dance. Therefore, Pun could only join the school's modern dance society and learn modern dance. Her experience is not unique among other students. During a casual daily chat with a group of female dancers, I learned about the restrictions that today's Hong Kong college students had earlier faced in secondary school.

When talking about past dance experiences at school, one of the girls laughed directly and said, "Everyone learns Chinese dance, and the school only has Chinese dance. Street dance does not seem to be easily and naturally accessible to students."

For students, the choice of extracurricular activities is not the only limitation; there is also a lack of students' autonomy in costumes and movements in terms of performance.

Based on my previous school experiences, I possess a deep understanding of this matter.

During a rehearsal for the class music contest, the music teacher expressed disapproval of our class's cover dance of a Korean girl group. The isolation movement of the hip, which is a common foundation in street dance, was considered by the teacher to be too sexy and should not be performed on the school stage. In addition, we were forced to wear formal uniforms, even though they were incompatible with our performance style. This is not an exceptional example. Through interviews with students, rules regarding daily school uniforms, such as "skirts must be above the knees," "bangs should not be too long," "sweaters cannot be worn when it is above 26 degrees," etc., are all similar. They represent a type of control via the school's policies for students' appearances. For boys, even the color of underwear is within the scope of school management. According to one of my male informants, for the sake of elegance, when wearing white summer school pants, boys must wear light-colored or white underwear; otherwise, they would be punished by the teachers for being "untidy in one's appearance".

The above-mentioned are things that schools generally do to maintain a simple and dignified campus atmosphere. Students like Pun, who has a great passion for K-pop culture and hence sparked interest in learning street dance, have usually been constrained by the school's authoritarianism. Neither dressing nor performing is a place for students to express themselves freely; the area where students can "show their potential" is in the sea of exercises and exams tightly following a given marking scheme. "Cou1 Gyun2" (操卷) ("Doing a large number of test papers") is an experience that almost all Hong Kong high school students have shared and is the basic manifestation of test-based education. Except for exams and study-related matters, everything else must be simple, including extra-curricular activities for especially S6 students. This form of education is the embodiment of authoritarian education.

Labeling Environments in HK and Beijing

Under the authoritarian educational model in Hong Kong, students are subject to a disciplinary structure: "people who are being educated surrender to external rules, unable to choose and decide for themselves what they should become" (Wang, 2013, P.84). Wang's research shows how educational autocracy manifests itself in various aspects, such as educational concepts, educational behaviors, educational management, educational evaluation, and even educational goals. The education policies focus on developing what are referred to as "qualified talents" based on external expectations and demands, disregarding

the interests, talents, potential, and opportunities for individual student growth. Students are labeled (top class, bottom class) by criteria such as entry grades.

According to several student dancers in Hong Kong and mainland China, it is very common to differentiate students in secondary education according to their academic performance, with Hong Kong having top classes and bottom classes, and mainland China differentiating between “rocket classes” or “fast” and “slow” classes. When it comes to university education, the phenomena of differentiation and labeling have relatively weakened in Hong Kong but still persist in mainland universities. When I asked about the labeling situation in universities, my informant at CUHK said, “I feel that CU only has the public's established or stereotypical views on subjects; for example, some subjects are "sacred subjects" (神科) and some we would call "blisters" (水泡). But other than that, there's no clear distinction, is there?”

However, my research at Peking University has found that students are treated differently depending on their grades, and it is the school that plays the role of differentiator. Peking University has set up the "Turing Class", which aims at nurturing top talents in the disciplines and is well-equipped with teachers. The university selects students based on their GaoKao scores and university grades, with an enrollment of only about 50 students per class. Hence, this class is often seen as a place where the "elite gathers". This somehow limits and influences the students' intentions to develop their potential outside of academics.

Suzhi Education in China

In recent years, there has been growing recognition among people from various walks of life in China regarding the limitations of traditional test-based education in fostering students' creativity and critical thinking. This realization, coupled with social development and educational criticism, has led people to acknowledge the benefits of American "competence education" and its influence on the transformation of China's education system towards *suzhi jiaoyu* (Bregnbæk, 2016). The purpose of this reform is to ensure comprehensive development for students and to enhance the nation's overall *suzhi* (quality). Undoubtedly, this educational approach provides students with ample opportunities for holistic development, allowing them to pursue diverse growth paths and realize their full potential beyond academic realms.

However, despite the persistence of the aforementioned authoritarian and labeling environment, it is worth noting that the motivation behind some students' engagement in extracurricular activities does not necessarily stem from a genuine interest in personal development. Rather, it is often driven by the school's bonus point system, which encourages participation in competitions and the cultivation of sports or artistic talents. This approach serves to gain an advantage in university admissions or to enhance their resumes by adding an extra feather to their cap.

By chance, I came across a link shared by the former captain of Peking University's hip-hop team in a group chat. Curiosity led me to click on it, revealing an article titled "Student of the Year: 2023 Candidates," which spotlighted one of the hip-hop team's members. The article showcased numerous accolades, detailing how this team member successfully joined the esteemed FL Crew's hip-hop team through a rigorous selection process. It emphasized how this candidate from the "Turing Class" exemplifies a well-rounded profile in both arts and sports. During my three months of observation and active participation as a team member, I never once encountered this individual during practice sessions. Perhaps this anecdote highlights that, for academically accomplished student dancers, involvement in street dance clubs serves as a means to demonstrate their ability to pursue diverse interests and ultimately garner more recognition and awards.

In addition, authoritarianism is reflected in the student association's scoring system under *suzhi* education. In the past, government departments often used the enrollment rate as the only indicator when evaluating schools (Wu & Wang, 2007), which led schools to educate students mainly based on academic performance. With the popularization of *suzhi* education, there are still goals to pursue and standards to meet in terms of extracurricular development. During a chat with the hip-hop team captain, Foozi, she mentioned a system in which mainland schools adhere to a standardized practice of evaluating and classifying student clubs. Clubs that demonstrate exceptional performance are granted elevation in status and

accolades, along with the allocation of additional and superior resources; conversely, those perform poorly are criticized and face dissolution. At Peking University, the dance club keeps pursuing the honors granted by the Peking University Communist Youth League Committee.

One day at the end of 2023, numerous members of all the groups related to the FL Crew on WeChat engaged in enthusiastic conversations simultaneously. It turned out that they were jointly congratulating the dance club on winning the school's highest recognition of the club. Everyone copied and pasted in expressing appreciation for the dance club. Members of the dance club were all proud that they went from receiving the honor of being one of the top ten societies of Peking University (北京大學十佳團體) in 2022 to gaining the highest level of recognition as a brand society of Peking University (北京大學品牌社團) in 2023. The details of these awards are noted on Peking University's official website as well. This could be seen as a soft means by which the university imposes implicit constraints on students' autonomy and self-directed growth, which cannot be found in the case of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Transformation into Liberal High Education

A noticeable distinction can be observed between Mainland China and Hong Kong regarding the prevalence of authoritarianism in their respective university systems. In mainland China,

universities continue to exhibit elements of authoritarianism, whereas in Hong Kong, the authoritarian tendencies that exist within secondary schools start to diminish as students progress into higher education, shifting towards Western-oriented liberalism.

According to Yeelok, my informant who has studied in both Hong Kong and the Mainland, "The pressure of studying in mainland China is not comparable to that in Hong Kong!" Although my other informants at Peking University did not emphasize the intense competition they faced, the huge population of the mainland and the research of scholars such as Bregnbæk (2016) on elite schools on the mainland show how the fierce competition for admission to universities on the mainland encourages mainland students to attach enormous importance to their studies at university. On the contrary, Hong Kong students have made the transition from authoritarian education in secondary school to liberal education at university. This kind of new *laissez-faire* that they experience has allowed students to focus more on developing skills other than academics. This results in a general difference in students' academic performance at the two universities' dance clubs.

Burning GPA in Hong Kong CUDanso

Pun's statement cited earlier implies an inherent conflict between being a part of the dance society and prioritizing academic studies. Based on my observations, it appears that students

in Hong Kong tend to experience a decline in academic performance when they actively engage in activities within a dance group. Similar to Pun, Christine, a medical student, acknowledged that her involvement in the dance club had a detrimental effect on her academic performance. During my interview with her last year, she was in her third year of study, and she described how being a student dancer at CUHK harms her academic grades.

I went to Christine's dorm for the interview during the weekday noon recess. Her roommate was out for class, and she greeted me in her two-person dorm room wearing a T-shirt with "CUDanso" on it, shorts, and slippers. Talking about her past, she used the Chinese word "*fu6 luk1*" (腐碌) (fluke) to describe her past life, but dancing with members of the dance society made her understand what hard work is. She did not know that people could work so hard and spend so much time just practicing a subtle movement. When I cautiously asked about her drop in grades, Christine spoke candidly, turning on her computer and showing me her transcript: "In semester 1, I failed all three courses I took. In the second semester, when the epidemic intensified and without dancing events, my grades improved."

To make a good dance in a large-scale joint school dance performance (Mass Dance), she engaged in training and preparation for six days a week during the summer vacation for the tour performance in November and December; hence, she did not have the time and energy to cope with her studies in the summer and fall semesters. Despite that, she explained that the consequence of failing courses in semester one was not serious because they only

accounted for 10% of the whole year, and she successfully passed the exam and progressed to her year 4 study.

Elise, a third-year nursing student, offered a different perspective on this. “When it comes to grades, it actually has minimal impact. My GPA is not poor, but I am the type of person who won't make much academic progress even without dancing.” Conversely, she emphasized, "Participating in CUDanso enhances my time management skills and heightens my awareness of the limited time available. It compels me to utilize my time effectively for tasks like reviewing and completing assignments."

To continue dancing, members exert efforts to compensate for their lower grades. I remember that during the busiest year (2022) of becoming a member, during the few days when the results were released in Semester 1, members shared the results in the group chat, and one of us majoring in nursing suddenly told us: “Because my term GPA this time was too low, the professor asked me to retake two subjects, and if I failed any subject, I would have to quit the university immediately. But I have no confidence that I can pass them all...” This situation of being on the verge of dismissal due to poor grades occurred more than once during my observation, but each time, the students were able to stay and continue to study for a university degree. Among them, the nursing student I am most acquainted with demonstrated significant improvement in his GPA, with an increase of at least 1.5 in the subsequent semester. The same improvement was shown in other members’ grades. In

semester 2, students getting a GPA over 3 were twice as many as in the earlier semester. It is noteworthy that none of these individuals chose to give up their involvement in CUDanso activities despite facing academic difficulties.

Time Management in Dance Clubs

CUDanso students eventually solved their academic problems and continued dancing, as attributed to their more rigorous time management skills. Similarly, PKU FL Crew students balanced well between study and dance, which aligns with the model under *suzhi* education. Throughout my practical observation, in addition to the contrasting perspectives on academics and dance among students in these two settings, a notable disparity is evident in their time management practices, specifically regarding late nights and exam weeks. It was intriguing to observe that amidst a life filled with both dance and studies, Hong Kong students always stayed up late for dance training or dedicated time to practicing dance even during exam weeks. Like Christine, almost every student dancer I asked mentioned an unforgettable memory: they consistently repeated the same movement as training from 9:00 p.m. until 3:00 a.m. to perfect their performance in the Mass Dance.

As one of the participants, I experienced this moment in November 2023, I clearly remember that after the first performance (there were ten performances in total), the tutors

expressed their dissatisfaction with our performance, so the team leader decided to practice extra that night to improve the shortcomings. The team members were dealing with piles of assignments, dragging their tired bodies to practice repeatedly. Members could only use rows of light tubes to illuminate the area since it was too late, and they could barely see the movements clearly. Eventually, someone broke down emotionally, with two girls hugging together and crying after the practice finished. Even so, under the dual pressure of internships/part-time work and studies, they still chose to sacrifice their time in the early morning for dancing.

On the contrary, I hardly ever saw anyone rehearsing or practicing late at night in FL Crew. Not only that, but it is also common for members to miss dance training or rehearsals due to final reviews or research experiments. Members only need to send a message in the WeChat group to explain their absence. I could often see FL Crew members complaining on social media about staying up all night to revise or do experiments, but this does not mean that FL Crew members despise performance or have no love for dance; their endeavors are easily and often seen in daily practice. As an exchange student with relatively more free time, I could see the former captain of the Breaking Team practicing alone on the B2 floor of the student center almost every night after the performance, even if there was no regular training that day. Therefore, this observation highlights the natural tendency of Peking University dancers to prioritize their academic pursuits over dance.

Mainland educators pointed out in their research that the Hong Kong school education system has shaped students' awareness of time management. The scholar's experience during exchanges and collaborations in Hong Kong revealed the Education Bureau and teachers' strict time control and management: "This approach of the school also quietly affects students, teaching them to be punctual and cherish time. The formation of time management in Hong Kong education has created a unique cultural phenomenon" (Xiao, 2023, P.9) This focus on time management and punctuality also reminds me of CUDanso's strict execution of time discipline.

'Lateness Policy' for Clubs

In the complaint of my informants, to ensure efficiency during practices, CUDanso strictly enforces a fine system as the penalty for people who are late or absent without excuse. As a team manager, and one of the members who set the rules, Pun is dissatisfied with this punctuality system. When I mentioned the opinion of another informant, who is also a member, he retorted, "discipline is necessary." Indeed, during my observation, Pun was never late. Danso's lateness policy requires members to arrive fifteen minutes earlier than the original start time. For Pun, this takes up her own time. In order to meet the arrival time, she needs to go out early, which she thinks is meaningless to her. Although Pun criticized Danso's strict control of time, I can also see Danso's subtle influence on her in terms of time

management. For example, as the person who leads teammates in dance exercises, Pun listed out the class rundown for 3-4 hours in her notebook before each class and strictly implemented details down to how many minutes to conduct physical training and take water breaks to ensure that the time can be fully utilized. When she was the guardian of the rules, almost all her teammates acted as enforcers and strived to abide by the rules.

This contrasts with the leisurely and easy-going atmosphere I saw in the FL crew practice room of Peking University. When practice time started but the captain had not yet arrived, everyone pulled out the yoga mat and laid on it to rest, do homework, or review (shown in figure 1). For them, being late is permissible because everyone has their own things to do. Even the leader of one team has been absent from regular training to drink with friends. Others did not take it seriously and made fun of him for his hangover. I was not used to this at first and later talked to Foozi, who also experienced Hong Kong Danso culture, and she said, “Dancing is not forced; it is voluntary... Those who join our team will take responsibility.” This is the perspective on the use of time and participation in extracurricular activities by student dancers at PKU.

When a mainland student participated in a CUDanso activity, she was late due to her discussion with her professor. When members punished her for being late, she expressed confusion and refused to pay the fine. She believed that delaying dance training because of her studies was a reasonable and legitimate excuse. While this clearly conflicts with the

concept of Hong Kong students at CUHK, the result is that the mainland student withdrew from all subsequent training at CUDanso.



figure 1

This may show different beliefs and time management approaches in balancing study and dance: mainland students try to invest effort into both dance and studies on the premise of ensuring academic achievement, while Hong Kong students devote themselves wholeheartedly to dance and squeeze extra time for studies. This shows how the neoliberal order reshapes people's experience and understanding of time. The idea that "time is money" (Sugarman & Thrift, 2020, p.810) is directly reflected in Danso's lateness system. Time is

considered an aspect of moral character, and people have a responsibility to make good use of their time. Influenced by neoliberal ideas, students strictly monitor their own time and the time of others in order to discover their own potential and enrich their personal resumes. “Neoliberal subjectification” encourages people to realize their potential and improve themselves (Watts, 2022). It is noted that CUDanso students were trained through Hong Kong's education system to realize their potential in using their time and personal abilities.

In short, based on my observation of CUDanso, the academic performance of club members typically declines due to participation in club activities. This may be related to the transition from an authoritarian secondary school education to a relatively liberal university education. The sudden freedom allows them to choose activities that they are more interested in and participate in wholeheartedly. However, students’ strict time management could create breathing space under intense pressure, showing neoliberal academic management styles. Conversely, most students in Beijing can still maintain strong academic results despite participation in the dance society. This could be part of the display of the *suzhi* education that encourages students to balance both academics and extra-curricular activities.

“Counterculture” in Street Dance Clubs

Street dance has always been regarded as a counterculture, embodying resistance, rebellious characteristics, and ideological expression, but when street dance entered campus, its original meaning of “freedom”, “individuality”, and “rebellion” was limited or degraded, and a new variety of youth culture was established. There are external and internal factors, including the authoritarian nature of schools and the power class structure of dance clubs, that limit students’ expression, autonomy, and resistance.

Dance = Freedom?

Does street dance represent freedom? This does not seem to be an inevitable conclusion in my research. The previous section identified authoritarianism and control of students in schools; thus, it may be ironic to study the extent to which students express themselves liberally in dance clubs. Instead, we can see how the counterculture on campus has been alienated and lost its original characteristics.

Suppression under Authoritarianism

At Peking University, FL Crew is like other societies, flaunting freedom from restraint to attract new members and taking “*Lei Li Feng Xing*” (雷厲風行) as the slogan and the

purpose of the association. Every FL Crew member can be highly independent and individualistic in their daily training and their freestyle dance performances, but there are restrictions on expression when students form a group. All public performances on campus need to be reviewed by the upper organizations on performance themes, music melodies and lyrics, dance moves, and costumes to ensure that the songs do not contain foul language or inappropriate connotations and that the dance movements and content of the performance do not have negative perceptions and impacts. Their collective expression can be described as “limited expression”.

The school's scoring system for clubs mentioned above also affects the connotation of students' expression through dance to an extent. The school provides resources to students, such as practice venues and subsidies for holding events. Freedom is inevitably compromised by this reliance on authority. FL Crew is one of several societies that typically appears in Peking University's admissions brochure. It is mentioned as a community culture that attracts students with its love of freedom, self-pursuit, and unrestrained personality (Tong, 2011). Students' performances and expressions under the school's restrictions do not display vulgarity and challenge authority but tend to be youthful, energetic, passionate, and full of fighting spirit. Some even take the traditional rituals of ethnic minorities in China's border areas as a theme to promote traditional Chinese culture. Under this kind of soft control, FL Crew can be said to be limited in revealing the personality of students; they can express

themselves as they like as long as this does not touch upon any sensitive topics.

In comparison, CUDanso students enjoy fewer resources offered by the school office, and my informants often complained about the lack of practice venues. Danso members were even driven away by security guards many times when practicing in the common area of YIA at night. Because of this, students are less dependent on the school. However, students are still restricted by external factors. For example, two dancers recalled that during the social movements in 2019, the Joint-University Mass Dance performance was canceled by the school one day before its official performance. Student dancers from 10 universities, including CUHK, lost their precious annual opportunity to perform on campus. The CUDanso freshmen team had planned to wear yellow helmet as part of the costume, the color associated with the protest movement, and this may be why the event was banned. After months of practice, all that remained was the video of the rehearsal. This may exemplify how student dancers' self-expression and resistance are suppressed, showing their loss of platform under pressure from society and school authorities. Hence, it elucidates the underlying factors contributing to the challenges and difficulties associated with the emergence of countercultures within Hong Kong society.

Internal Inhibition of Freedom

The dancers themselves emphasize unity, not in appearance but in the thought that everyone serves for routines or choreography. For instance, in the process of preparing for a competition as a participant, my most remarkable memory is the exchange of feelings and thoughts with the team, which comprises more than 20 members. In pursuit of a shared understanding and alignment regarding the thematic significance of dance choreography, we discussed the dance from three o'clock until nearly six o'clock in the morning. Everyone sat down in a circle and took turns analyzing the meaning of the dance moves and sharing our own opinions. This was so meticulous that even the positioning of the eyes and facial expressions must be strictly unified. This experience displayed the persistence of student dancers in the dance club in the expression of dance; they did not just regard it as a performative tool or a simple superficial gesture. At the same time, this reveals how dance clubs prioritize unity in expression, showing the formation of collective expression and the deprivation of personal expression.

Additionally, there are restrictions on freedom of dance expression stemming from CUDanso's strict discipline in managing members and teams in daily routines, as mentioned earlier. According to my informants' complaint and my participation, to ensure efficiency during practices, as earlier noted, CUDanso precisely enforces the fine system as the penalty for people who are late, absent without excuse, or whose phones ring during practice.

Members even need permission from the tutor or team manager to use the bathroom. After each training session, PIC (the person in charge) criticizes those who violate rules during lessons and emphasizes that disciplinary rules are set for the entire team and expects that everyone will abide by them. Through the suppression of personal interests, the role of focusing on the collective and the cohesion of the team is achieved.

True freedom for dancers and their personalities can only be shown in informal activities. Therefore, students I observed during performances such as Madan, the Joint-University Mass Dance Performance, dyed their hair light and wore heavy makeup and fancy accessories to stand out and express themselves among others. However, as we have just seen, this expression is limited in the overall context of dance.

In FL Crew, although choreography is also the core of the performance, the captain did not pursue strong consistency and often even added solo parts of the team members in the performance to support the team members and show their personal style and charm. Therefore, the team members are relatively casual with their performance costumes or hairstyles, focusing more on dance itself. The FL Crew also did not build and preserve strict discipline. Captains such as Foozi even called on everyone to order takeout and drink hand-cranked milk tea between practices. They often talk and laugh during rehearsals, and conflicts rarely occur. Therefore, relatively speaking, the FL Crew has loose discipline and thus less suppression of self-expression.

Hierarchies Inside Dance Clubs

Apart from the suppression of free expression through dance, the formation of hierarchies--classes--also reflects the lack of counterculture in the dance clubs. Under the influence of classes within the club, the self-expression through street dance is actually not as unbridled as people's perception of ordinary street dance.

The hierarchical differentiation within FL Crew is relatively slight. Specifically, the executive branch of FL Crew operates separately from the core dance club and is referred to as the community council. Therefore, the status and power among them are disconnected from those of ordinary members. Within the club, roles are primarily limited to straightforward job assignments, encompassing the positions of captains and vice-captains across the eight dance teams. According to Foozi, their rights and obligations mainly just lie in choreography and music selection, while executive powers are minimal. Team members can put forward opinions on choreography, music, or themes instead of simply following the decision made by the captains.

The CUHK Danso's strict discipline is accompanied by clear class stratification. Unity must be achieved in many ways, and its direction is determined by the president of the dance club. Unlike Peking University, the dance club at the Chinese University of Hong

Kong integrates administration and dancing into one organization, in line with the common practice in Hong Kong schools. Due to this mechanism, ordinary members cannot choose their preferred dance style or teachers they like for learning and teaching during showcase preparations. The “Jong” (the student board of directors in the dance club) is typically comprised of individuals who possess an ardent passion for dance. While they may occasionally seek feedback from members through questionnaires, this practice is not obligatory, and they retain ultimate decision-making authority. Members cannot express themselves as they wish. Instead, during practices and shows, they must dance according to the angles, movement lines, and even attitudes determined by the team manager.

Apart from this, a hierarchical culture of graduates and freshmen is also significantly present in the dance club at CUHK. There is a scoring system for members to become “OG”, a slang term that originally stood for “Original Gangster” but now means “old graduates” (老鬼). Members who participate in more events can gain more points and finally earn the “OG” status. “OG” in the CUHK dance club receive preferential treatment at events such as discounted dance lessons, and other dancers must respect them as they are predecessors who contributed to the dance club. Compared to freshmen who are new to the dance club, “OG” definitely have more power in discourse, which can even sway the decision made by “Jong”. For instance, they provide advice on the dance types and activities for the coming year. Even though everyone is a member of the dance club, the relationship is unequal, and power is

roughly related to the dancer's contribution over time. This kind of class stratification goes against the idea of dance having a countercultural meaning.

On the contrary, although the FL Crew also inherited the term "OG" in hip-hop culture to address old graduates in the club, in the actual power and participation of activities, "OG" are not seen as superior because of their status or as having privileges that ordinary members do not have. Without much class stratification in the FL Crew, students are relatively equal and independent from each other.

Dancers' Resistance

Hong Kong local students seem to be more receptive to the systems established by earlier students than students from the mainland. I recall a conflict that occurred between "Jong" and a mainland participant dancer. He was dissatisfied that he had to pay an absence fee of HKD \$200 just because he was temporarily absent from a class without notifying the person in charge. The administrative person of "Jong" explained that the penalty scheme and rules are set "to ensure the smooth rundown of the lesson so that participants can get the most out of it" via text. The two sides broke up in discord. To a certain extent, this revealed mainland students' resistance to authority in fighting for personal rights, while local students in Hong Kong compromised or accepted this, like the informants who complained to me instead of

taking action to oppose the charge or system even though they thought it was unreasonable.

The Meaning of Dance

When I asked about the original element of resistance in street dance, my informants didn't really care. They did not join dance clubs out of dissatisfaction with reality, rebellion, or resistance. The solidarity of the club, which is contrary to traditional street dance and freedom, attracts them more.

Elise said, "Companionship is important". Rather than dancing to express herself, she initially joined just to meet a group of friends to dance with. As for the culture of street dance, she told me frankly, "In fact, I'm not really that passionate about street dance." Seeing my surprised expression, she smiled. Yes, in my impression, Elise is an active Danso participant. You could see her in almost every activity held by CUDanso, and you could often feel her affection and support for other members. For example, she would send cheering messages to the group on the eve of the IVDC competition; when the results were about to be announced, I happened to be rehearsing with her for the float tour, and I saw her checking her smartwatch every few minutes to pay attention to the news, with her eyes showing all her nervousness. She continued, "Yes, actually, my favorite dance style is still jazz funk." On the contrary, she is not very fond of classic street dance styles such as hip-hop and locking, which

are mainstream in CUDanso. Even when it came to expressing herself through dance, she felt that the two years at Danso had weakened her personality and characteristics in dancing. She lamented that she could no longer dance in her previous style. Since the collective expression stressed in Danso and the standardization of dance habits have unknowingly regulated her, she doesn't regret it because dancing has helped her make more friends.

In accordance with the team uniforms designed by the hip-hop team in FL Crew, the two characters "*Chun Cui*" (純粹) (pure) on the back represent Peking University students' feelings about hip-hop and street dance. The meaning attached to street dance is already different from the past. "Peace and Love" became words on the lips of dancers on campus. During one-on-one competitions, judges usually point out that members do not have a strong desire to attack opponents or are too nice in battle. This may be related to the fact that members come from authoritarian and class-divided backgrounds. This has nothing to do with the features of counterculture.

All-Round Student Dancers

During our conversation, Elise brought up the fact that while Danso performs highly unified choreography, it also requires dancers to have freestyle or battle abilities. This is also what I observed at two field sites. Although tutors often say that attitude is important, all members

agree on the importance of ability development. Even in Freestyle, you need to have enough skills to be able to express something. “I actually don’t quite understand why Danso people, including tutors, have this mindset that ‘a good dancer must be able to dance in unison and be able to freestyle at the same time’”, Elise said. Even though she said this, she is actually a very good dancer from this perspective. She always dances very expressively and has rich expression management.

At this point, Pun, who had been listening quietly on the side, suddenly became excited and gave Elise a thumbs-up with both hands and a look of affirmation. Even as a team member, Pun does not like the way CUDanso forces people to do freestyle. Even if Danso emphasizes choreography and uses mainly routine as the way to select members when casting, it adds "freestyle" in the final part to test the members. This freestyle has become different from the original essence of expressing oneself freely on the street and has become one of the ways to be judged by the upper class in Danso, such as team managers or “OGs”, for one's dancing ability.

In FL Crew, students did not ignore freestyle attempts either. For auditioning for new teammates, FL Crew, unlike CUDanso using group dance assessments, provides the opportunity for members to perform alone on stage to show their individuality as well as their solo ability, as we saw at the beginning of this paper. Also, two to three inside-school battle events were held in just one semester. Members also actively participate in competitions

outside the school to compete with others in both freestyle and choreography aspects.

In Hong Kong's education system and in the *suzhi* education advocated today in mainland China, "all-roundness" is a trait pursued by both parents and students. Regarding street dance culture (group dance or battle), Elise thinks it is a matter of personal choice and preference. For example, she enjoys dancing together, especially the process of learning dance, and this is a manifestation of everyone working together to form the same thing. But to become a competitive club and an excellent dancer, you have to develop in more than one aspect. Contrary to Elise, FL Crew's member Yeelok said that he prefers freestyle much more than choreography. But even so, he did not give up training or performing in group dance. Like most dancers, Yeelok agreed that this is the improvement and exercise of personal dance abilities, which have long been different from the free movement of street dance itself and the countercultural rebellious spirit it embodies.

In an earlier interview, Pun said that after participating in Danso, she realized that she preferred K-pop covers to hip-hop. When I asked, "K-pop is more about imitating other people's finished dances. Do you think this lacks personal thought or expression?" Pun said, "I feel that during the cover process, I can try more diverse styles, and also express myself through more facial expression." This also responds to the above discussion of how the collective expression of the community limits people's individualized expression.

Gains from Street Dancing

From an outsider's perspective, it may be puzzling to see the sacrifices dancers make to dance. In interviews with informants, more than one person mentioned that there were times when their parents did not support them, and they usually were asked, "What's the use?" or "You're just an amateur". During my observation, there were teammates who went home too late and put too much energy into dancing, causing quarrels with family members. Moreover, being a student dancer has undeniable impacts on financial and health conditions, in addition to academics. Expenses, including clothing and tutor fees, are mainly borne by the members. In CUDanso and FL Crew, injuries are common in dance practices, including fractures. But no one gave up because of this; they returned to participate after a period of rest. Even during the epidemic period, training did not stop.

Despite the physical exhaustion and occasional injuries caused by strenuous exercise, Christine emphasized that the rigorous dance training had greatly improved her fitness and diminished her previous weakness. Additionally, she asserted that joining the dance club had boosted her confidence. Previously, she lacked the courage to look in the mirror and even felt somewhat inferior, avoiding having her picture taken. However, dancing had transformed her mindset, enabling her to confront her reflection and cultivate self-appreciation. Although she may have appeared slightly hesitant while expressing herself, her unwavering eye contact instilled in me a belief in the authenticity of her words.

Dancers do not just see dance club as a simple place to do extracurricular activities, but as a community for members to share happiness and disappointment. They escape from the unpleasantness of their lives, an unhappy family, or the pressure of social life and pursue their passion while meeting like-minded friends or lovers. College is unlike secondary school, where everyone meets every day because of the prescribed class schedule, and so making new friends may be difficult. As Elise mentioned, through dance she came to make new long-term friends when it was actually hard to make friends in her major. Since every class is a large lecture and there are more than 200 people, even in a small tutorial class, everyone attends classes with those who they already know (e.g., via Jong or other activities). “Everyone likes different things and has no common hobbies. Some people will go home after class to play with cats, read books, and review; while I like dancing, fitness, and other more dynamic activities”, Elise said.

One of the “OG”, NaoDai, in the FL Crew mentioned that, as a non-Beijing native, if it were not for the dance club, he would have no nostalgia for Beijing. As a PhD candidate, he has been at Peking University for eight years. This thought was not unique to him. After a performance, members and I drank and chatted at the celebration dinner party. Some indicated that FL Crew was one of the reasons they continued or decided to continue studying for a higher degree at Peking University. They demonstrate a strong sense of belonging to the club and love for its members. I remember that when I first arrived at Peking University, I

saw a heart-touching performance at the orientation event for FL Crew. Before the performance started, the current president of the dance club talked about the disappointment he had experienced in love not long ago—he had broken up with his girlfriend. During the period when he was depressed and in pain, Fenglei's friends stayed with him, eating, drinking, chatting, or dancing, to help him get through that difficult period of nearly half a year. The original choreography work called "Heartbreak Anniversary" is composed of 12 of his friends representing 12 months, marking the first anniversary of the farewell. He was very grateful for the company of his friends, and he called on everyone to join the dance club and make good friends there. Thus we can see that the initial purpose of joining the dance clubs was never to resist society, nor to pursue the improvement of individual dance skills. Instead, students paid more attention to the connections and relationships with their peers.

Identity Formation and Recognition

Although the above reflects how the free expression of club members is suppressed due to authoritarian backgrounds and class situations, members can still express and understand their personal identities to a limited extent through street dance culture outside of group dance. For example, members' individual gender identities are expressed through their choice of dance styles. Yeelok said that gay men in clubs often like to dance jazz and waacking, because the history, elements, and clothing of these forms of dance allow them to express

themselves and their emotions without restraint. Waacking (hand-waving dance) was born in the LGBTQ community, emphasizing that dancers believe in themselves and encourage them to be their truest selves (Yuen, 2021). One of my informants in CUDanso said he recognized his sexual orientation after he joined Danso. He is keen on waacking and has participated in numerous dance competitions and battles inside and outside the school. Dance became a way for sexual minorities like him to release themselves and communicate with society. Even though he still doesn't dare tell his parents that he has found his first boyfriend, he gained support and understanding from the friends he met in Danso and through dance.

From what we have discussed above, it seems clear that the student dancers at the Chinese University of Hong Kong are in a relatively liberal educational environment and system, but the students themselves have, in turn, created restrictions on freedom, and the students' obedience to the established system actually reflects the discrepancy and lack of coordination between dance club culture and street dance culture. Both the unfettered quality and the dancers' rebelliousness were eliminated when street dance came to the university.

Conclusion

From this research, we can see how diverse education systems affect students' academic as well as extracurricular performance and autonomy. Under authoritarian education, the labeling environment and educational methods compel students to work hard for higher scores and better futures. It is because of this emphasis on academics that street dance, as an extracurricular activity, conflicts with it. In secondary school, mainland and Hong Kong students give up participating in club activities such as street dancing to ensure academic stability. In order to improve their college admission rate, schools will restrict students from participating in activities other than academic studies and inhibit students' individual expression.

After entering college, FL Crew and CUDanso represent students from different educational backgrounds: authoritarian and liberal. Street dance clubs are also subject to varying degrees of restrictions in both contexts: members of FL Crew still valued university studies; on the contrary, the sudden shift from a restricted environment to a relatively free learning environment in CUHK led to CUDanso members sacrificing their studies to dance with all their strength. Therefore, their academic performance was usually worse than that of FL Crew members at Peking University.

Before doing this fieldwork, I had heard many people saying that “Danso people give up on learning,” they only focus on dancing and having fun,” and even that they are the

“free riders” in group assignments. But after conducting interviews and observations, I can see their senses of responsibility in balancing their academics and dance. There is not always an inverse relationship between students' academic achievements and their involvement in clubs. The claim that members are irresponsible has been shown as inaccurate in this study.

This research has heightened my awareness of the influence exerted by the education system on young people. As I came to understand the repression of dance club members under authoritarianism and *suzhi* education, as well as how street dance culture as a Western youth counterculture lost its character when it came to campus, I became more aware of the invisible limitations of the environment in which I live. By understanding the external factors due to the restrictions on teens' freedom, my attention and recognition of the variance in the development of Eastern and Western subcultures have increased.

It is crucial to use education as a research factor to comprehend the shaping of youth culture and students' personal development. As a student and a dancer, I admire the courage and drive of my informants, as the representatives of today's youth, to move forward.

Although this research still contains many shortcomings, such as the lack of a comprehensive study of students' gender identity, I hope it can be an opportunity for you who read this far to get to know students who are active in clubs from different perspectives. I seek to change society's prejudices against student street dance and provide new insights into studying youth culture and reforming education.

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