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Pedagogy Without Pedagogy: Dancing with Living, Knowing and Morale

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Abstract

This article takes its retrospective lead from the oppressive schooling years during the Chinese Cultural Revolution to reflect on the educational significance of artistic activities through considering aesthetic virtues and moral agency cultivated in these activities. Describing an unconventional educational milieu where schooling was deliberately ‘dismantled’, I emphasize the important role that artistic endeavours can play in building a person’s aesthetic strength and moral power to overcome the adversity of life, hence for the fuller human development. By blending philosophical discussion with historical manifestation, I stress the less articulated educational discourse that makes dance relevant to the educational formation of epistemic virtues and moral sensibilities. Joining in the emerging efforts to improving the worlds of schools, curricula, and pedagogies, I argue that the contingent integration of different histories, life conditions, and social and cultural discourses are ‘transformative’ sites for pedagogy. Thus, I seek to shed historically fresh light on the ways of thinking of schooling, education, and the arts for hope and possibility to ultimately argue for ways that can speak to the diversity of global societies today.

Keywords: pedagogy, dance, aesthetic virtues, moral agency, China

Introduction

Central to modern education and institutional schooling are pedagogy and curriculum. Scholars, public intellectuals, and activists have made impressive efforts by contributing to the burgeoning and yet rapidly changing field of pedagogy (Bowman, 2013a, 2013b; Daniels, 2001; Dunne, 2013; Osborne, Houston, & Toman, 2007; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2009). Earlier theories on pedagogy are diverse with such foci: as Dewey’s (1897, 1902, 1938/1998) experiential education, emphasizing students’ experience in their knowledge acquisition; Piaget’s (1926, 1936/1975) cognitivism, focusing on children’s developmental and learning stages; Vygosky’s (1962) pedagogic practice within the social environment; Freire’s (1970/2006) critical pedagogy on developing students’ consciousness of freedom, and Rancière’s (1981/1991) radical pedagogy of teaching what we do not know.
More recent writings (Chambers, 2013; Stamp, 2013, and others), evolving from these theories of pedagogy, expand to public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2009, 2011) and effective pedagogy (James & Pollard, 2011; Osborne, et al., 2007). The former focuses on processes and sites of education beyond formal schooling, while the latter emphasizes the effective teaching and learning as a lifelong process and in diverse contexts. More efforts have been made for new pedagogies (Laker, 2003; Loughran, 2005; Westbury & Milburn, 2006). Take pedagogy of the body (Gilbert, 2013) as example, which seeks to describe how the embodied learning and teaching take place and how the existing pedagogy theories can and cannot address the embodied processes of education.

‘Pedagogy’ is deemed, in general definitions, as the art or science of education, or the methodical or instructive strategies of teaching. Etymologically defined, pedagogy is ‘to lead the child’ (from Greek word, \textit{peidagoge}). How to lead the child concerns the ways, the means, the art, the science, and the like. As such, we are not always clear whether or not we still equate pedagogy with teaching technique (Alexander, 2008), or, as the simple delivery of information (Loughran, 2005). In his recent assertion that ‘[c]ulture has been theorized as pedagogy’, Bowman (2013a) sees culture and education as similar or ‘interchangeable’ in both concept and use (p. 45). Emphasis on cultural studies becomes the focal standpoint for studies of pedagogy (see Bowman, 2013a, 2013b; and others). As discussed above, it is not to be denied that proper engagement with pedagogy entails cultural, historical and international perspectives and considerations (Alexander, 2008). All pedagogical practices and informed principles, paralleling with patterns and models, are conceptualized, designed and exemplified. They are eventually to be practised with in schools and classrooms. Thus, it is only natural to conceptualize ‘pedagogy’ as such, not otherwise, in educational contexts for educational knowledge and development.

However, what will education or pedagogy look like when there is no privilege for pedagogy, for teaching or instruction? I ask this question because I hope to know whether or not and how education and/or pedagogy would invariably occur, when no conceptualized ways exist to ‘lead the child’. My pedagogical thinking in this particular sense entails an introspective inquiry into a history and a lived condition. By way of autobiographical illustration, I shall recount a tale of a ‘child being led’ through her living circumstances, her schooling years, and the socio-political conditions. By blending philosophical discussion with historical manifestations of the oppressive schooling years during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, I reflect on the educational significance of artistic activities taken as the chief curricular and pedagogical practices then. Describing an unconventional educational milieu where schooling was deliberately ‘dismantled’, I emphasize the important role that artistic endeavours can play in building a person’s aesthetic strength and moral power to overcome the adversity and hardship of life. Through stressing the less articulated educational discourse that makes dance relevant to the enhancement of one’s epistemic virtues and moral sensibilities, I hope to further illustrate that there exists a pedagogy or education that go beyond any form of pedagogy: ‘pedagogy without pedagogy’ I would call it. This means that such a ‘pedagogy’ does not focus on the teacher’s effective instruction of how to ‘lead the child’, but, rather, takes its ‘instruction’ from the matrix of living
and lived circumstances and evolves toward the end of that living, the lived, and, hence, of the fuller human development.

Thus, I argue that the contingent integration of different histories, life conditions, and sociocultural discourses is "transformative" sites for pedagogy. The arts, in this case, are, by their very nature, such transformative sites for pedagogy. Put another way, the arts are the actual pedagogical settings, in which individuals, young or old, can adapt and adopt the artistic activities as 'pedagogies'. These, then, 'lead them' (the young or the old) through certain necessary and contingent circumstances—the real life curricula. I hope to shed historically fresh light on the ways of thinking of schools, curricula, teaching in terms of the arts for hope and possibility so as to ultimately argue for ways that can speak to the diversity of global societies today.

**When Schooling was Dismantled...**


* Sudden and all!
* Desolated onto a sweeping outpost
* We still listened, to the sound of reading words,
* But, how dim. How tantalizing…
* From there, the paled roses, barren of the green
* Begged for myriad tinges, if not bright hues;
* Upon here, the parched terrain reached out
* For raining flakes of torn pages and broken letters.
* We lingered, then, in our erudite poverty, and, often
* Bumped against others’ innocent yearnings;
* Then, we were coursed by our own,
* Dancing feet, maddeningly, onto the ignorant weeds.

(A poem by the author, 2011)

Why did ‘dancing’ (and the arts by extension) matter in this particular case, and/or, maybe, in other educational cases? The educational significance of artistic activities has long been studied. David Carr’s writings focus on aesthetics and aesthetic education, with a special interest, among other topics, in the meaning of dance and its moral values in relation to ethics and moral education. Carr addresses the nature of the arts (literature, music, painting, dance, etc.), specifically from the standpoint of philosophy of art and its importance in education. In a discussion of dance from the viewpoint of philosophy of education, Carr (1984) argues, ‘Of all the forms of human endeavour that may be found presented in an educational curriculum, the place and status of dance is perhaps the most ambiguous’ (p. 67). Carr thus insists that dance as an art form requires an educational approach similar to other forms of art, rather than being simply ‘taught as a branch of physical activity by teachers of physical education’ (p. 67). In linking the sociological or anthropological aspects to a more philosophical aesthetics or semantic theory, he emphasizes dance as having ‘intrinsic educational value’ (Carr, 1997, p. 365).
Responding to this call for the educational value of dance (as urged by Best, 1985, 1992; Carr, 1984, 1997; McFee, 1992, 1994), I ponder what intrinsic relationship the arts may have with education as represented in the curricula of educational institutions, and, in particular, when formal schooling is not in place. And how does this inherent connection between dance and education influence the formation of one’s aesthetic virtues and moral agency? This brings to mind an unforgettable scene a long while ago when dance became a mode necessary for survival. What more, then, could this specific artistic form, apart from providing me with necessary skill or social status, render in the name of art, or artistic activities? What did it matter in that situation to a person’s educational growth? For this article, the question of art is framed in terms of intellectual and moral virtues, such that are elucidated in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE, 2009 version). These virtues can be encompassed in the claim that one’s own artistic action fosters a person’s epistemic consciousness, ethical sensibility and aesthetic contemplation.

So, I am compelled to connect these questions to what matters in the art of dance during and beyond the ten-year (1966–1976) Chinese Cultural Revolution when formal schooling was irregular. This connection, then, has been interspersed by my constant anxiety and serenity in radical sympathy: a mixed and distinct awareness. The dance I chose to do was not only politically necessary for my ability to live a life and to fit into the social order under an oppressive regime, but also valuable as a means of forming a conscientious personhood. I danced in order to survive, consciously or otherwise. But the more recent motto, ‘Dancing for your life!’ on the American and Canadian dance contests that, to some extent, parallels the spirit of dancing to live a life, urges me to pursue the worth of that single ‘dancing’ platform when traditional schooling was politically disfigured.

Under China’s unprecedented Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, the entire nation was deprived of education, books were banned, schools destroyed, and teachers—my father among them—were thrown onto work farms to be ‘reformed’. There came, first, an order to suspend school nationwide in order that students and teachers could join the revolutionary campaign, and, later, an ‘Announcement with Regard to Resuming Classes and Waging Revolution of Universities, Middle and Primary Schools’. From then until the end of the ten-year Revolution, higher education was entirely shut down to admissions, while elementary and secondary schooling, though active, were often suspended, or otherwise regularly interrupted.

Even during the active school days, we could, rightly, or I should say, officially, commit ourselves to ‘revolutionary extracurricular activities’, such as dancing, singing, telling ‘revolutionary stories’, and other revolutionary propaganda activities. Most of my five-year elementary school days were spent rehearsing and performing the ‘Eight Modern Revolutionary Model Operas’ advocated by Chairman Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, a movement that pervaded throughout China, while the slogan ‘Learn, Sing, and Perform Modern Revolutionary Model Operas!’ rang out and resounded everywhere in the country. Implicitly, this became the heart of our curricular tasks.

What then could the arts do for pre-school children and post-school youths in the anarchical period when parents and teachers were constantly mobilized in the heated ‘left-and-right’ campaigns and knowledge was ‘proudly’ undervalued? As German
poet–thinker Friedrich Schiller observed in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795/2004), people cannot transcend their circumstances without education, and art, as he conceived it, is the vehicle of education. How, then, could we young people transcend our particular circumstances when our education was unquestionably problematic under the political condition of China? Did art in this case prove Schiller’s assertion of art as the vehicle of education?

**Epistemic Virtue: Dancing to Know and to Justify**

*In the praise of the utmost*
*Is the very matter of dancing;*
*We effaced our low appearance,*
*In organic grace and beauty.*
*So that we originated the selves*
*In the vindication of our forced ones.*
*To shine our physical exigency in dance*
*Our merits were erected to acclaim.*

(A poem by the author, 2011)

It seemed to us that singing and dancing ‘Mao Zedong Thoughts’, through these revolutionary model operas went far beyond the simple experience of political agenda and artistry. Participation in these highly praised activities changed our lives utterly, in turn, from our already drastically altered ones upon the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Consider my radically ‘altered’ family. My father and mother were taken away to the countless public denunciations, to work farms to be reformed, to ‘study classes’ for self criticism, to cowsheds and prison for a treatment of graded severity; while we three siblings—on-and-off schoolers—were under the ‘leadership’ of our eldest brother, 11-year-old Shudu, occasionally supervised by our old nanny *Lei Popo*.

There was a belief that the future life of us ‘whelps’ of the social pariahs (my father was persecuted as reactionary academic authority, traitor, and special agent) was hopeless: obviously no college, no jobs, possibly no legitimate city-residence, unless—in a yet tantalizing hope—we had obtained special talents and skills such as singing, dancing, playing music instruments or sports. So my parents started us very young in ballet (for me) and in violin and sports (for my second eldest brother Ming). Besides the reason that urged us to be under discipline, another devastating one was that my eldest brother Shudu was killed in electrified water, while swimming in our local *Tuojiang River*. The tragedy happened on a normal summer day, one of the many oft-dismissed school days—as usual, the teacher didn’t show up for class. So the boys went swimming nearby and four of them were ‘electrocuted’ in river water at the same time!

Indeed, engagement in these artistic activities ‘overturned’ our abject lives, although under the banner of ‘Propagandising Mao Zedong Thoughts’. People, young and old, joined in the campaign, singing operas, reciting lyrics, acting the leading heroes, watching and doing the same artistic activities. Especially, we ‘school’ youngsters, as it were, learned, sang, and acted. We chosen ones were sent to be trained by professional ballet troupes, rehearsed endlessly, day and night, performed virtually in
every possible place: at school, in the streets, on theatre stages, in factory workshops, on military drilling bases, and in crop fields. That was the idea! That was the primary thing that we knew we were to learn and to do, both in school and out of school.

**Epistemic Virtues**

Virtue, as we understand it from Aristotle, is a trait of character, rendering its possessor good, morally and intellectually. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which mostly concerns individual moral virtues and how to attain them, Aristotle says, ‘Intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching’ (*2009* version, Bk 2, p. 23), which therefore requires experience and time, while ‘moral virtue comes about as a result of habit’, which we are adapted by nature to receive, and ‘are made perfect by habit’ (p. 23). This means that nature gives us the capacity to acquire them, but they are brought forth by habit. And the virtues we get by first exercising them, as happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. Moral virtue, ‘like arts, is acquired by repetition of the corresponding acts’ (*NE*, Bk 2, p. 23). For Aristotle, art is ‘a reasoned state of capacity’ and involves ‘true reasoning’ (p. 105)—knowledge of how to make things. We may say that this sort of knowledge is one form of practical wisdom, as Aristotle confirms in Book VI of *NE* that ‘all the virtues are the forms of practical wisdom’, or at least, ‘they implied practical wisdom’ (p. 116). For Aristotle, ‘practical wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral’ (Bk 1, p. 21) conveys a general sense of knowing the proper behaviour in all situations. Art, as a capacity to make things, implies both intellectual and moral virtues. In Aristotelian view of art and ethics, morality is found to be concerned with goodness and beauty, while aesthetics is seen as a practical art. This sort of practical knowledge leads to ‘intellectual virtue’ (p. 21) and it is also a dependent part of moral virtues. As such, it can be asserted that ‘the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) both completes and presupposes moral virtue’ (see Carr & Steutel, *1999*, p. 11). Through repetitive dancing and singing in the operas and ballet dramas, we acquired knowledge of how to dance and sing—epistemic virtue. We could say that we acquired artistic ‘conceptual knowledge combined with a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of ideas that literally transform one’s experiences and perceptions’ (Girod, Rau, & Schepige, *2003*, p. 578).

**To Know and to Justify**

In our situation, our key personal perseverance helped us to understand ourselves, to justify our existence, and to continue the way over the years. We practically and habitually acquired this quality through training, practicing, and performing of dance, which gradually led us into an aesthetic way of knowing and formed in us a recognizable personal disposition—a sort of virtue, I would say. We then would, over time, associate the corresponding exercise of this disposition or virtue with an ethical way of thinking and knowing, because such a way had given us an epistemic motivation to come to terms with what was true and real in our existence through our own embodied perceptual intensity of dance. With this sort of virtue, we were also led to avoid perilous errors (as my parents hoped for after brother Shudu’s death).
On the occasions where life was at stake, especially for the blacklisted families, like my own, dancing for me, as for others, was a particular activity that could help us foster our personal qualities such as tenacity, perseverance, humility, hope and the like. These were obtained by committed and epistemic practice, through ‘experience and time’ and, over those years, ‘brought forth by habit’, which internalized an epistemological determination through action and doing. Embedded in the aesthetic form of habituation, dance functioned as a nexus of the public and private space in us, in which the dancing subject was supposed to know who she was. Through aesthetic experience, Schiller (1795/2004) asserts, people can reconcile the inner antagonism between sense and intellect, nature and reason. Enabled to follow on epistemic grounds, the movements of our self-knowing from hidden aspirations to open admission to fear for our life then raged at rejection; we then justified our way of being, in a grander sense, our existence. This epistemic nexus is crucial to our capacity for heroic determination to carry on a meaningful living. This character trait, of any I possessed, made me advance in assuming the principal role, Xi’er (喜儿), in the ballet drama The White-Haired Girl (‘白毛女’).

This practical and epistemic actualization of dancing led me to discover the truth of life in which I was living and the place in which I interacted with others, and to avoid wrong deeds that might challenge the social order designated for a child, like me, who came from the ‘Black (meaning ‘Bad’) Categories’. Dancing and singing, which had become another means for me to express my thoughts and interact with this socially and politically unjust world, necessitated both individuality and collectiveness. This, in turn, granted me both a sense of justice and a capacity not only to know in the artistic areas but also to know how to do the right thing over time. I had come to know what should be the right thing to do, aesthetically and intellectually, rightly and practically. The intrinsic relationship between the arts and arts-cultivated epistemology, indicated what I should be (moral virtues) and how I should act (practical knowledge) in accordance with the mean, relative to me. (Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean represents all virtues as gaining a balance between two extremes, see NE, Bk 2, p. 33) This knowing allowed me to justify my condition and the deeds I was performing. Dancing, which made me feel accepted in the group, seemed to justify what I did for my own sake and for the sake of the demand of the social order under those particular conditions.

**Moral Agency: Dancing to Overcome the Self**

*The open espousal of elegiac voices and moves*
Catalyzed our conflicting impulses
*And committed us more to the nature of our being;*
*The onrushing outlets of dancing*
Braved us to walk a path with a chisel
*To pry open the gate, yet we turned firmly inward.*
We knew: if the deathless earth had forgotten us,
We could still dance to fold the dazzling ‘red’ sky.

(A poem by the author, 2011)
Dancing and singing in the ‘Red Sea of Mao Zedong Thoughts’, besides meeting our need for survival, had become a special mode of living—another means and a better means for us to be ourselves, expressing thoughts and interacting with the outer world—which supported both our individual and collective sensibilities. Our artistic engagement, despite being summoned up by a historical political condition, gave us aesthetic and disciplined forms (or a capacity or disposition aforementioned, and to which I will return later), especially that of the kind shaped through physical, emotional, and habitual practice in dancing and singing. Those who could dance and sing—participating in any of these forms, no matter how well they did according to the ‘professional’ standard—were reported to do better in their schoolwork. Their artistic attributes culminated in their recognized achievements in schools. More often than not, they had more chance of being awarded the highest praise (popularly designated for us school students), entitled ‘San Hao Xuesheng’, (‘Three Merits Students’), or called ‘all-rounded students’ with three well-developed merits: ‘De, Zhi, Ti’ (‘德, 智, 体’)—‘moral’, ‘intellectual’, ‘physical’. And this was the highest goal that I, like many other pupils, was striving to achieve.

In those days, De (or moral, virtuous) was the foremost merit a student should aim at. Ti (physical) encompassing artistic and sports activities readily implicated the embodied De (virtue). The standard for assessing a student in this honour, though not merely confined to singing, dancing or other artistic and sports experiences, was certainly privileged by his or her art and sport knowledge and skills—epistemic virtues, or ‘intellectual virtues’ (to use Aristotelian expression again, knowing how to perform these artistic and sport activities). My brother and I won such a ‘grand honour’ several times, despite many opposing voices against our ‘black’ (politically bad) family background. I was granted ‘Little Red Guard’ at Grade 2 (an honour for primary school pupils, and ‘Red Guard’ for middle and high school pupils). That was a huge honour for me, a daughter of a ‘Five Black Categories’. Such activities equipped us with disciplined habits by which we were able to receive more than what we actually possessed (e.g. our innate talents) or what we were accordingly to obtain (e.g. skilled talents), and without which we seemed, at those times, to possess nothing.

Moral Agency

Similar to epistemic virtues, moral agency (a notion I brought into discussion of dance and art) is not merely a moral virtue, distinctive from intellectual one. Agency, as it were, is the source or power from which actions are derived. Simply put, it elicits action. For the purpose of discussion, such agency, as acquired from dancing, formed in us a disposition to yield certain outcome, that is, we became skilled in ballet techniques or in deft singing and acting persona. The power of our acting and the power of dance as a manifestation of aesthetic power to represent our talents enabled us to tackle our dire situations. Moral agency—correlative of action, following Aristotle, arises from both intellectual virtue and moral virtue, through teaching, learning, and practicing. Through such experiences over time, we allegedly became ‘ballerinas’ and ‘opera singers’ by dancing and singing, just as in Aristotle’s example: ‘men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre’ (see NE, Bk 2, p. 23).
This sort of power is not intrinsic, but built into our being and doing, which in turn is the source and origin of our choices and acts. Aristotle’s idea of moral virtue reinforces this point, since both choice and act are closely bound up with virtue. For Aristotle, choice is ‘deliberate desire of things in our own power’, and actions elicited by such agentic power are called ‘voluntary’ ones taken ‘with knowledge of the circumstances’ (Bk 3, p. 38, p. 43). Since ‘virtue is concerned with passions and actions’, Aristotle says, the ‘moving principle’ is, therefore, inside the person who acts and contributes to what he acts upon (Bk 3, p. 38). Our dancing, singing and sporting passions and actions were thus mixed, more like voluntary actions, according to Aristotle, because ‘they are chosen at the time when they are done, and an end of an action is relative to the occasion’ (Bk 3, p. 38). So, the choice and action we made in the dire situation come into being with true knowing (reasoning) and moral state (NE, Bk 6, p. 103).

In Chinese culture, possession of moral strength is a merit or virtue, akin to wisdom or strength. Both art and practical wisdom are constitutive of our individual strength through collectiveness (by which I mean here a group whose commonality in these artistic activities was the commitment to engage in actual doing and repetitive practicing, apart from serving a political end). While serving as a means of living, dancing braced us through difficult times, allowing us to manifest a capacity to confront unpredictable challenges (e.g. the death of my brother, my father’s sudden disappearance, my mother being taken away, and constant humiliation of my young self...). Then what would, could, we do? We just danced. We continued dancing, which in turn bestowed in us moral agency, and the capacity to transcend our circumstances, to return to Schiller’s assertion, and this transcendent agency (both spiritual and physical) was ‘habituated’, ‘practiced’ and cultivated via artistic activity, attaining the sort of Aristotle’s ‘practical wisdom’ (NE, Bk 1, p. 21). Once again, Aristotelian sense of art is practical wisdom that is ‘identical with a state of capacity to make, involving true reasoning’ (Bk 6, p. 105), and making it possible to practice the moral virtues properly. Thus, our artistic actions and moral capacity aforementioned were intricately coming into being with contriving and considering how to act against the situations, intellectually and morally.

**Overcoming the Self**

Over the years, intensive dancing and performing of *The White-Haired Girl* and *Red Women Soldiers* (two ballet operas) made me into a popular little ‘ballerina’ (though still unacceptable for being a professional one, in which sense, being a professional meant a secure and desirable job—one unquestionably *not* for a daughter of a ‘black-listed’ background). Ten years of countless ‘meetings’, big or small, criticizing or condemning, had become the routine of our life. One time (after the end of the Revolution), my mother and brother Ming were forced to be present for all three days of my father’s denunciation, though I was allowed to be absent in order to rehearse for the evening performance of Mao Zedong’s *Propaganda Thoughts* in our local Sichuan Opera Theatre. The performance was to be on the same stage where the criticism was being held in the day. I had experienced numerous criticisms and meetings that
condemned my father, but I had never been ‘forced’ to dance on the spot where my father had been persecuted, humiliated, beaten, savagely bound by ropes, and dragged away only hours before.

Having grown accustomed to this pattern of our family, people accepted the irony of the occasion: that the girl would dance Mao Zedong’s Propaganda Thoughts opera on the stage where her father had spoken against the authorities only moments before. The family, including myself, accepted this paradox as a necessary part of survival in these troubled times. That night, however, I felt that the audience had an uneasy and piteous feeling toward me, a 16-year-old girl caught in the political conflict that had engulfed China. Perhaps they wondered how I could still smile and remain captivating for the audience! How could I dance as if nothing had happened? That night, on the stage where I had performed countless times, my strength surged with me through a flood of onrushing rage. Later on, when asked how I was still able to smile while dancing that night, I recall telling people that my eyes were full of blood. Finally, I bought myself into the culture of my oppressors through singing and dancing, which earned me agency to appropriate that context for a self-renewal and even self-creation. I became concerned with finding opportunities through acceptance and liberation, rather than through victimization and oppression. This became a source of moral potency for our being and existence then.

**Aesthetic Contemplation: Dancing to Hope**

We danced to aim  
In the contemplation of a grandiose anchor;  
We beamed into an embodied vision,  
Our fondue desires grew, exchanging  
Living fetters for a freeing gait of hope;  
We yearned for connection—  
Everything for it, we dreamed!  
Our esteem and sense of being in the world.

(A poem by the author, 2011)

We danced, certainly, to achieve an end, either to survive an ordeal, or to enjoy an aesthetic manifestation. We were often acclaimed for our presentable images, despite their transient presence both on and off our performing ‘stages’, whereby we were still confronting that politically real existence. Our creative conduct in dance and other artistic pursuits could be understood not only as the achievement of political objectives but also as the contemplations and outcomes conditioned by discipline and practice in the vision of the beautiful. This is further illuminated by what Carr has argued for on a number of occasions (Carr, 1984, 1987, 1997, 1999, 2004) about learning, skills, and knowledge in relation to aesthetic experiences. And our specific purposes embedded in those artistic activities and skills came about through our aesthetic contemplation and hope.
Contemplating the Beautiful

Beauty or the way of contouring the image of beauty was different, if not distorted, in the times of socio-political instability in China. Or else, it connoted a specific sense in that the vision of beauty encompassing the colour red became the compelling image that weighed heavily in our vision of beauty. During my teenage years (although the Revolution had already ended), I avoided appealing colours or clothes, or any allegedly ‘petty bourgeois’ ways of life. But, as a matter of fact, we didn’t have many choices due to the generally meagre living provisions of China then and my father’s frozen bank account (one of the many restraints and punishments for a ‘black’ element of society—and we had grandparents to support as well from my mother’s 32 yuan monthly salary, as a gynaecologist and obstetrician). Of course, beauty may not have anything to do with wealth or poverty, and it should also be independent from political imposition. But beauty, besides all possible connotations for the notion, is what is considered to be true and good.

Although I might have gone too far in saying this, I felt, particularly at the age of seeking confidence and approval, ashamed of being ‘beautiful’, or afraid of being categorized as such. I took pains to ‘hide’ whatever I thought to be pretty or beautiful in the beholder of a 15-year-old. For example, it was easy for me to wear only plain colours either grey or yellow, and to roll up my pants and sleeves to have a more ‘proletarian’ than ‘bourgeois’ appearance. But it was difficult when I chose to do something more actively damaging to the possibly and potentially ‘beautiful’. For example, ashamed of having a fair complexion, I exposed myself deliberately to the hot sunlight (e.g. without a straw hat or something to shield from becoming dark), as in transplanting rice seedlings in the paddy fields in summer when being dispatched to the countryside to ‘learn farming’ and in enjoying dancing and performing in the open sunny air. But what a paradoxical contemplation: I wanted my skin to be ‘darker’ but my public status ‘redder’.

For a long time, I was so ashamed of showing anything naturally good or beautiful, especially my allegedly ‘well-endowed’ chest that I made myself a second bra over the regular one, a special bra made as a tight vest to be fastened by eight buttons on one side, so that it could serve to flatten my too ‘showy’ chest. For this ‘shame’ was aggravated in me when one morning after our performance the night before, our class teacher called on me. Standing outside the classroom windows, often terrified on such occasions, I heard the teacher say, ‘You danced beautifully, people said, but your… your breasts were shaking on the stage…’ Upon these words, I had an instant fit of ‘black-out’ and could hear no more of what the teacher was uttering. I was too ashamed even to know where to hide at the moment. Such a stigma for a 15-year-old in those days was far worse than the shame of being the whelp of a politically ‘black category’.

So I managed to do all that was needed in the hope of being acceptably ‘beautiful’, or explicitly ‘ugly’. (However, I knew that I would benefit more from the latter.) Either way would make me feel right or accepted. But it was only in dance and on the performing ‘stages’ that I could maximize my free self to be as true, real, and authentic as I was, as I could be, and would be. The true representation of the kind, though limited, unfettered my authentic being, so that I could present and represent...
the real and the good. In concert with Wittgenstein’s assertion that ethics and aesthetics are one, we thus had some ethical import in our much more abstract representation, in which we could reveal the nature of goodness and which at the same time was to instruct us in goodness. And this should echo in Schiller’s (1795/2004) expression: ‘As our nature finds itself, in the contemplation of the Beautiful, in a happy midway point between law and exigency, so, just because it is divided between the two, it is withdrawn from the constraint of both alike’ (p. 78). Our contemplation or reflection of such living conditions connoted our first free relation to what surrounded us then, and thus turned it into our true selves and thus secured us from passion for life. For Aristotle, the contemplation of the Beautiful inspires admiration, because ‘[e]very art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is sought to aim at some good’ (NE, Bk 1, p. 3). For Schiller, the Beautiful is intrinsically associated with reason and morality, because ‘Man must pass through the aesthetic condition, from merely physical, in order to the rational or moral’ (1795/2004, p. 12). In other words, our intellectual and moral virtues are to be cultivated through the refinement of the aesthetic sensibility. Beauty, on this account, afforded us a special kind of aesthetic property.

To Hope

In those days, hope was the thickest straw that we could clutch at. Our aesthetic contemplation—understanding of our real beings, our anticipated desires, and our expectations of higher attainments—became one of the virtues in our personal and social lives, extending to reinforce our possibilities of profounder contemplation and hope. Like other virtues, hope arises from our will to aim, to persist in surviving or transcending our circumstances, and to seek to be part of the existing world.

With hope through dancing, I survived the disasters that befell me. The Cultural Revolution finally came to an end! China’s higher education resumed, after the long lapse of ten years! Although my father was still imprisoned, my brother Ming and I, fortunately enough, as those so-called ‘teachable sons and daughters’, were admitted, one after another, to the same university after competitive entrance examinations. It was, however, those fears, worries, and efforts over the years—the stretching of mind and body in imaginative contemplations and fascination—that sustained us with ample room for even profounder reflections and higher hopes. In January 1981, I won (in a duet dance) the first prize at China’s First National University Dance and Singing Competition—the highest honour (it was said) for our university since its founding. In June of the same year, Ming risked his life in firefighting at our university library and saved the state’s Classic Chinese Dictionary that was being compiled there. Later in the year, Ming was chosen as a National ‘Three Merits Student’ representative to be reviewed by China’s high officials in Beijing. Also, in January 1981, my father was released from prison and resumed (after being an ‘incorrigible reactionary academic authority’ for 11 years) his associate professor position in the Mathematics Department of his former university. Our clutching onto hope had bestowed on us many possibilities. When we hoped, we hoped for what we contemplated to be possible.
The Arts Educate People to Be Free and Responsible

Regards to you!
The freedom of charming dignity—
Inviolable moral nobility of human nature;
Between the rule and the sublime
Arises no single indolence,
But gathers every consonant diligence.
The truest of the true never rankles,
And nothing ever shakes our authentic presence.

(A poem by the author, 2011)

As illustrated in the way we survived under conditions of severe subjugation, the arts in general, and dance in particular, were thus conducive to both our epistemic and moral virtues through our artistic embodiment and aesthetic contemplation. Dance seemed to lead us to find the way through our limited existence to independence, reflection, and, ultimately, freedom. As Schiller (1795/2004) describes, we may have already, in our artistic endeavours, realized our ‘physical determination with a certain freedom that belongs to our spiritual nature—that is, according to the laws of Beauty’ (p. 110), and thus, we reached our moral determination to hold our own existence accountable. Art, (especially tragedy, for Schiller in On the Aesthetic Education of Man, as for Aristotle in Poetics, 1965) afforded us opportunity to exercise our moral power to do what we ought to and needed to, and with the capacity to be free of our external ‘fetters’ and internal limits, hence insinuating us into a condition of contentment and sublimation at a time of great political and social instability.

In Schiller’s (1795/2004) view, we humans must first learn to serve beauty before it could faithfully serve freedom, or political liberty, as in the case of our artistic activities during the Cultural Revolution. When we are ‘allowing Beauty to have precedence of Freedom’ (p. 27), we might be able to ‘solve that political problem in practice’ (p. 27). According to Schiller, the aesthetic condition shall ‘restore Man to himself as that he can make of himself what he wills’ (p. 12), willing even in the service of politics. Over the path of aesthetics, ‘it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom (p. 27). Schiller’s metaphor of that ‘Art is a daughter of Freedom’ (p. 26) intimates the intrinsic relation between beauty and freedom. The art, then, were a powerful learning vehicle, upon which we had largely relied for a kind of humanity that was beyond us in China then, but could so remain with much benefit to our existence through an artistic mode of manifestation. This aesthetic form greatly enhanced the lives of the young whose families, such as my own, were the blacklisted or outcasts, and who had been deprived of their very means of human agency. And this means, which was the conditions of their humanity, had been renewed or even recreated through the various aesthetic modes.

In the face of the harsh reality, dominant as it was in our experiences, dance (and other forms of art) engaged our emotional and physical aims in that we became concerned with finding opportunities through responsibility and freedom, rather than through the passivity of victimization and subjugation, or (in Schiller’s expression)
‘through an intermediate condition of aesthetic freedom’ (1795/2004, p. 108). That is, we were thus committed to these activities, responsible for and responsive to our becoming active of contemplating, hence willing towards an aim through necessary condition. By this condition alone we can attain to social acceptance with a nobler confidence. As Schiller says, ‘there is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic’ (p. 108), because we authentically engaged ourselves with transitioning from the aesthetic condition to the epistemic and moral.

It might follow that when we were concerned, according to Schiller, with what we did, with the contents of our actions; we cared about the way in which we acted, ‘without thereby in the least acting counter to our physical aims’ (p. 110). That is, our endeavours were directed strictly towards the form of our activities, as in those of fundus, pirouettes, grand jetes (we had Chinese equivalents for these technical ballet terms), and all that we cared about and concentrated on; we were engaged with—‘telling’ the story of the poor little girl (in the ballet dance drama). This was the place wherein we were encouraged to maximize our desire for freedom out of our absolute spontaneity in a proud sense of responsibility for heeding and attaining our physical aims in dance. We danced and acted with absolute commitment to the story lines and the highly engaged combinations of graceful movements. And through this we transcended our circumstances. For Schiller, this is the education of humanity, because we could only accomplish such transcendence with education, and art, in this case, is the vehicle of education.

Although it may challenge us to accept this view of dance and education, especially in the context of a modern institutional curriculum, it is worthwhile to appreciate the purposes of dance, as Carr (1984) has long asserted, ‘by understanding the place of particular dances in different forms of human life and culture, and refining and reaffirming those purposes in education’ (p. 76). This, I believe, suggests that human virtues, moral powers, and political freedom—things that are essential for the educational formation of conscience—increase through artistic and aesthetic enactments. And such authentic engagement makes one undergo an aesthetic experience, which personifies—in a free and responsible form—the pedagogy of a moral education.

**Conclusion**

My retrospective effort has thus offered a pedagogical thinking that differs from the traditions of pedagogical theories and practices, by depicting a possibility for varied sites of pedagogical transformation. Consider, for example, the ten evidence-informed’ principles for ‘effective pedagogy’ James and Pollard (2011) have endeavoured to develop. These efforts are consonant with the idea of Jacques Rancière’s (1981/1991) ‘emancipatory master’. In his ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ argument, Rancière explores the pedagogic practices of Joseph Jacotot insofar as it sets a model of effective pedagogy. This instructional model explicitly differs from that of didactic and informative expertise, but resonates among some well-recognized forms of pedagogy: experiential and progressive education, critical pedagogy, to refer back to Dewey (1897, 1902, 1938/1998) and Freire (1970/2006). To join in these efforts, I have posited that the origin
of pedagogy takes life in its distinctive way as a matrix of learning and teaching. Such is a holistic pedagogy that brings learning into life and taking up teaching from life, and that causes learning and teaching to converge at the intersection of life and pedagogy—the living and the lived, in which true education can reside. In order to open minds to varied sites of pedagogy beyond schooling, I hope to invite a thinking about the worlds of schooling and education so that it may address the question, raised by Robin Alexander (2008), how education and pedagogy might respond to a world in peril.

References


