

Analysing Western Classical Ballet with Bourdieu's Field Theory How to use it as a social stratification tool

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Abstract. Known as one of the representatives of elegant art, western classical ballet holds a certain status and influence in Western society. During the reign of Louis XIV in France, with his vigorous promotion, ballet gradually flourished, even serving as a tool for the king's prestige to achieve French national independence [1]. Through analyzing the phenomena of ballet in the western society, it can be found that classical ballet has become a social stratification tool in Western society. The learning threshold for Western classical ballet is relatively high, and students from upper-class society have more opportunities to receive high-level classical ballet education, while students from lower-class society often lack the corresponding capital and other issues to gain equal opportunities. However, ballet in China, through the combination of localisation and orientalised, ballet has become a popular dance form for the Chinese public. This paper will analyze how Western classical ballet serves as a social stratification tool in Western society using Bourdieu's field theory, comparing with the social function of ballet in China.

Keywords: classical ballet; field; Social stratification.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research on classical ballet and ballet education

In the study of classical ballet popularization, Wang Yan highlighted the promotion of ballet activities by Russian emigrants in Harbin and Shanghai during the 20th century, while outlining methods for popularizing ballet[2]. In the research on ballet education, Chen Yiwen emphasized that ballet's promotion as aesthetic education has already laid a solid foundation for social popularization and discussed how adult aesthetic education can bring direct changes to society[3]. Tina Zubovic stressed the need to integrate the concept of aesthetic education in ballet practices, paying attention to individual emotional experiences and aesthetic perceptions in order to cultivate artistic accomplishment and cultural literacy[4]. Homan believed that classical ballet, as an elegant art form, can enhance physical fitness, assisting in mastering multi-dimensional knowledge, as well as improving aesthetic level, appreciation ability, body health, and etiquette[5]. These documents collectively underscore the significance of classical ballet in popularization and education, discussing its history, promotion methods, association with aesthetic education, individual emotional experiences, and cultural literacy. They provide insight into the multiple benefits of classical ballet in social and personal development.

1.2 Research on social stratification in classical ballet education

Guest (2007) discussed the relationship between classical ballet and social class, analyzing how social class influences students' participation and opportunities through research on classical ballet education practices in the UK and the US. Guest summarized the experience of social class in classical ballet, the mechanism of educational social exclusion, and its impact on social mobility[6]. Carol (2016) pointed out that students' status and opportunities in classical ballet schools are often influenced by their social class. Wealthy students usually have greater access to high-quality classical ballet education, with more resources and support, while students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face challenges such as unequal opportunities and lack of resources. Carol also noted the hierarchy and social status within ballet schools. Students' status is not only determined by their technical skills and talent but also influenced by their social

background, economic status, and family background. This hierarchy can lead to disparities and inequalities among students [7]. Warner (2015) conducted field research on multiple ballet schools in the US and found that students, facing social stratification, would tend to internalize the differences in social class when they encountered it. They strived to adapt and accept the hierarchy within the school while also accepting their own social status [8]. Bain (2018) highlighted the important role of social class in the experiences of classical ballet dancers suffering injuries. The study found that dancers from different social class backgrounds would face different challenges in terms of injury risk and recovery process. Wealthy dancers may have greater financial means and resources to seek support for treatment and rehabilitation, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face financial difficulties and lack of resources[9]. In conclusion, these literatures emphasize the need for improving the education system, reducing social inequality, and addressing the issue of inequality of opportunity and social class in classical ballet schools. They point out that the education system needs to provide equal opportunities and resource allocation, while paying attention to the differences in social class and cultural capital. Moreover, the hierarchy and social status within classical ballet schools also have an impact on students' status and opportunities, potentially leading to disparities and inequalities among students.

1.3 Theoretical concepts

Bourdieu's field theory holds that different social groups are situated in different fields, which determine their status and opportunities. In the realm of classical ballet learning and performance, students from upper-class backgrounds typically have access to excellent dance schools and receive professional guidance. This concentration of high-quality resources makes it easier for students from upper-class backgrounds to master the techniques and essence of classical ballet, leading to higher status and prestige in society. In contrast, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face limitations due to lack of resources, as they have difficulty accessing high-level classical ballet education. As a result, their social status and opportunities are limited.

In Bourdieu's field theory, the core concepts are "field," "habitus," and "capital." They interact with each other to form the framework of Bourdieu's social practice theory. The "field" refers to the objective relations within social space, which Bourdieu believes is a network or structure of objective relations among various regions of society[10]. "Habitus" can be understood as people's perceptions influenced by objective conditions, resulting in different habits. The field shapes habitus, and habitus follows the field. Different habits reflect two contrasting class tastes—upper and lower. Bourdieu defines four types of capital: economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital, and cultural capital. Economic capital can be manifested as monetary resources; social capital represents the web of interests and power relationships; symbolic capital symbolizes personal authority and reputation. Cultural capital takes three forms: objective, institutional, and concrete. Unlike economic capital, cultural capital cannot be inherited directly; the only way to gain access to cultural resources is through education. Education provides children from different classes with the right to learn and presents them with opportunities to showcase themselves. Bourdieu believes that education is essentially a form of "symbolic violence", a cultural hegemony imposed by an "arbitrary power".

Through reproduction of the ruling class's culture, education realizes social reproduction. On the surface, it appears fair, equitable, and democratic; however, every aspect of knowledge production and dissemination permeates symbolic power, favoring those with cultural advantages who can legitimize and legalize it, realizing social class structure reproduction. Moreover, education not only allows people from all levels around the world to grow together but also provides them with platforms to express themselves. Western classical ballet serves as a cultural symbol and social symbol, reinforcing social class division to some extent. On stage, actors wear elaborate costumes and masks, presenting an image of nobility and elegance. This image conveys information about social class differences and privileges, further deepening the gap between upper and lower classes. As Bourdieu points out, education is essentially a form of "symbolic violence", as a result, cultural

hegemony engage in socio-economic activities with repetitive education and the thought of feudal ruling classes.

2. Cultural Capital in the Field of Western Classical Ballet Education

2.1 Objective patterns

The objectification of cultural capital is manifested in itself in material form, for artifacts, works, artworks, etc., and in the embodied hypostasis of cultural capital in this form, fused with the corporeal real individual, thus becoming a conscious choice of one's own cultivation and preferences but also a gesture that includes a choice of body language, gestures, cadences, and cultural modalities, etc. [11]. The objective form of cultural capital is expressed in the level of knowledge, literacy, and understanding of arts and culture that students have. This knowledge and literacy include knowledge of ballet origins, history, development, performance techniques, physical performance, dance forms, and other related areas. Students with this knowledge and literacy are more likely to understand the inner and outer expressions of ballet better and, thus, can learn and improve their performance better. Different classes of learners tend to perform differently and, in some ways, influence the way they understand and perform classical ballet. For example, amongst the learners, those from higher class backgrounds are usually more confident and self-respecting and are more likely to gain opportunities and attention; whereas those from lower class backgrounds are more likely to face financial, psychological, and life pressures and need more tenacity and hard work to succeed. From the perspective of the appreciators, the price of a ticket for a ballet performance is also very high. Those who are willing to go into the theatre to watch classical ballet will also be influenced by the social class and cultural background of different audience members, which will affect their feelings and evaluation of the dance works. Sensitivity to beauty and aesthetic ability is also required, because Ballet is an art that requires an in-depth understanding and perception of music, dance, and performance.

2.2 Institutional patterns

Institutional cultural assets, recognized as academically valuable cultural capital, are formally independent of the individuals who possess them and are officially recognized and guaranteed for their legitimacy, coercion, and importance [12]. The institutional form of cultural capital is primarily expressed through perceptions and understanding of institutions and systems, as well as the significance and pursuit of diplomas. It is important for students to have a clear understanding of ballet learning rules and regulations, as well as the content of their studies. They must also adhere to these guidelines and the curriculum in order to engage in rigorous training and performances. Additionally, obtaining a diploma is a significant goal for students pursuing higher education and qualifications. However, there exist significant differences between various educational institutions. Students from top-tier institutions such as the Royal Academy of Ballet receive world-class education and resources, while those from general art colleges or low-grade training institutes may struggle to access the same level of resources and opportunities [13]. The cultural capital of institutional forms of social space which are composed of different class groups also varies, with each group possessing its unique social status and role. Classical ballet companies, being social systems composed of various class groups, exhibit distinct differences in their status and roles. For instance, students from prestigious institutions often hold high "symbolic capital" and become lead dancers or principal performers, while those from ordinary institutions can only become backup dancers or mass performers. This disparity affects ballet student competition and has turned classical ballet into a tool for social stratification in the West.

2.3 Specific patterns

Specific cultural capital is in the form of an enduring "disposition" of the mind and body. This accumulation of cultural capital is situated in the body and takes the form of what we call culture,

education, and cultivation[12]. During the learning process of ballet, it is necessary to improve one's technique and performance level through long-term and persistent training. This requires students to possess a habitual spirit and "persistent temperament", which means being not afraid of suffering, trials, and tribulations, and dedicating themselves to studying and mastering ballet techniques and performance methods to achieve higher levels of performance. Simultaneously, good physical condition and quality are also essential for students to learn and perform ballet, so paying attention to the maintenance and cultivation of the body is crucial. The specific form of this capital is especially evident in the dietary habits of ballet dancers. Classical ballet dancers aim to maintain a good figure, and their bodies should be presented as works of art to the audience. Therefore, their diets are extremely strict, usually consisting of low-fat, low-sugar, and low-calorie foods.

As students pursue ballet, they need to focus on maintaining and refining their bodies. This includes regular exercise workouts to maintain flexibility and strength, as well as following a nutritionally balanced diet. By taking care of their bodies, students can better fulfill their potential, enhance their dance technique, and improve their performance. In addition to the physical demands on the body, students must develop a habitual spirit and an enduring disposition. This entails a deep love and passion for the art of dance without fear of hardship and trials. Only with these qualities can students persevere and overcome difficulties and challenges, ultimately achieving a higher level of dance and art. This actually is what the upper-middle class pursuit for excellence.

3. Social Stratification Exacerbated by Classical Ballet Education

Bourdieu categorizes society into three classes, with the artists occupying the dominant class. In Western society, classical ballet, considered a high-class art form, is often seen as an emblem of elite culture, and the requirements for cultural attainment are relatively demanding [13]. Due to the exorbitant tuition fees and the lengthy training period, classical ballet dance has almost become a marker of social identity, reflecting the phenomenon of social stratification. This thesis reveals that classical ballet itself serves as a tool for social stratification in Western societies, and that Western classical ballet education exacerbates this stratification by perpetuating it through social reproduction.

3.1 Social "reproduction" through ballet education increases social stratification

Bourdieu's theory, rooted in "cultural arbitrariness", posits that all cultures are characterized by this arbitrary element. Bourdieu asserts: "Educational action is a form of symbolic violence imposed by an arbitrary power.... All educational action is, objectively speaking, a form of symbolic violence" [14]. This notion of social stratification arises from the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Disparities in education, culture, and habits lead to class distinctions. Education reproduces society by perpetuating the culture of the ruling class, as it is essentially a form of "symbolic violence" imposed by an arbitrary power. During the reign of Louis XIV, ballet flourished under his strong advocacy, becoming a crucial tool for the king's prestige and display of national power. Under the rule of the monarchy, ballet became a cultural monopoly, reserved for the enjoyment of the nobility. Those with significant amounts of capital typically dictated and defined the norms and values of culture, making it easier for them to access cultural capital.

Classical ballet schools reproduce the elite culture of the upper class in a covert manner. Social reproduction occurs through the reproduction of elite culture. However, for the lower class, the elite culture of the upper class is external and unfamiliar. The growing environment is not conducive to their absorption and internalization of elite culture. Since elite culture originates from the upper-class field, it has no roots among the lower class, making it difficult for it to become a habitual part of their lives [15]. In classical ballet schools and institutions, the social class of the students often affects their chances of joining and studying in prestigious companies. In Western society, classical ballet holds the highest status in the field of art education. Ballet requires rigorous training and strict skill requirements to perform complex movements. As a result, its learning costs

are substantial and not accessible to everyone. Additionally, ballet necessitates long-term practice to master, which poses an unbearable burden for lower-class families. Classical ballet education exacerbates social stratification in Western society by reinforcing these disparities in opportunity and access.

4. Comparison between Chinese ballet and Western Classical Ballet

The establishment of the ballet program at Beijing Dance School in the 1950s marked the beginning of China's emergence in the world of ballet art[16]. During this time, Chinese artists began to explore ways of combining traditional national culture and art with ballet. In the early stages of China's development of ballet, it was mainly an imitation of classic Western ballet theatre productions, without any particular innovation of its own. In the 1970s and 1980s, China began to experiment with integrating traditional Chinese dance elements into ballet, leading to the creation of a unique "Chinese-style ballet". This innovative attempt brought Chinese ballet works closer to Chinese culture while also injecting new elements and vitality into world ballet art. The birth of Chinese ballet works such as "Red Detachment of Women" and "White Hair Girl" finally broke this mold, clarifying the direction of the development of ballet in China and making it more relatable and appealing to audiences[16]. In China, the western classical ballet has been able to break social stratification through its incorporation of national system, cultural differences, dance style, technical requirements, performance characteristics, and music selection different aspects.

4.1 National political system differences

China and Western countries differ significantly. China is a people-centred socialist country, while Western countries are mainly capitalist with a bourgeoisie-dominated political system. In the past, classical ballet was often used as a tool of French national power to showcase its cultural influence. However, in China, ballet has evolved to serve the masses and act as a medium for cultural dissemination. This highlights the difference in the political systems between China and the West.

4.2 dance style and cultural differences

For western ballets "Swan Lake", "The Nutcracker", "Sleeping Beauty" and other works, their story background and plot are European fairy tales: "Swan Lake" tells the story of a beautiful princess by the evil magician into a swan; "The Nutcracker" tells the story of a little girl dreaming of his prince on Christmas Eve, and was brought to him in an enchanted kingdom; "Sleeping Beauty" tells the story of a princess who is cursed by a wicked witch until a prince comes to rescue her. The styles of these famous ballet drama are basically unrealistic romanticism, idealism and heroism.

In comparison, Chinese ballets have a variety of themes, including historical, folk and modern. Among them, The Red Detachment of Women, The White-haired Girl and The East is Red are the classic Chinese national ballets. The Red Detachment of Women, about the women's liberation movement under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, is a revolutionary song and a passionate and heartfelt dance work. The White-haired Girl" tells the story of the tragic fate of a poor farmer's daughter in a feudal society and her struggle against the landlord. The East is Red" is a national ballet with the background of the Chinese Revolutionary War, which expresses the heroic struggle and victory of the Chinese people in the Revolutionary War. Chinese ballet pays more attention to the performance of Chinese traditional culture and modern themes, while Western classical ballet pays more attention to the performance of European historical stories and romanticism themes.

4.3 Technical requirements

Chinese ballet is relatively loose on the technical requirements of the dancers, and pays more attention to the overall beauty and expression of the dance. In contrast, Western ballet pays more attention to the perfection and precision of technique, requiring dancers to have a high degree of body control and flexibility. Chinese ballet performances are usually more dramatic and allegorical by telling stories or conveying emotions through dance, while Western ballet pays more attention to the beauty and artistry of the dance itself, pursuing perfect movements and postures.

4.4 Music selection

The music of Chinese ballet is usually played by traditional Chinese instruments, such as guzheng and erhu, creating a classical atmosphere. Western ballet, on the other hand, uses more western instruments such as orchestra and piano, as well as some classic ballet songs.

By analysing and comparing the differences between Chinese ballet and Western classical ballet. It will be found that classical ballet has become a tool for social stratification in the western society and the reason why it has become a popular dance form in China. The difference in political system reflects the institutional form of cultural capital, as the political system determines the educational system, and in the West there is still the Royal Ballet Academy. Secondly, the difference in culture reacts to the specific form in Bourdieu's cultural capital. Most of the Western ballet story backgrounds and plots are European fairy tales, and the style is mainly non-realistic romanticism and idealism. While Chinese ballet has a variety of themes, including history, folklore, focusing on the expression of traditional Chinese culture and modern themes, Chinese ballet is a popular art, everyone can contact and understand the ballet, while the Western ballet serves the aristocrats and the upper class, and in the choice of music as well. In terms of the specific form of cultural capital, in terms of the technical requirements of the scholars themselves, Chinese ballet is relatively loose on the technical requirements of the dancers and pays more attention to the overall beauty and expressive power of the dance, while Western ballet pays more attention to the perfection and precision of the technique, and has higher requirements on the dancers' body control and flexibility.

5. Summarize

Through Bourdieu's field theory to study how Western classical ballet became a tool for stratification in Western society, through the comparison between Western society and China, the analysis found that ballet society only appeared in Western society, and ballet entered China to become a popular culture through localization and orientalization of ballet. The analysis found that there is an obvious problem of social stratification in western classical ballet education. This will not only affect students' learning and development, but also may have an impact on the inheritance and development of the whole classical ballet culture. Instead of breaking down the barrier between social classes, classical ballet education has caused the phenomenon of reification to occur, exacerbating the phenomenon of social stratification in the West.

Through this thesis it is hoped that everyone will have equal access to quality education and participation in the transmission and development of ballet culture. In conclusion, the problem of social stratification in classical ballet education is both an objective reality and a difficult problem that needs to be solved. We need to discover the essence of the problem with more detailed and in-depth thinking, and encourage more people to join in the inheritance and development of classical ballet culture. Realize the vision that all people can participate in the art of classical ballet on an equal footing.

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