



Exploring the Career Progression of Dancers — Based on the Inspirational Careers of Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee

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Abstract: A great dancer is not only talented in dance but has also produced many original dance works and has influenced the development of the dancing art in general. In this article we will discuss two great dancers, Dai Ailian from China, and Choi Seunghee from South Korea. They are both pioneers of dance in their own countries and have played an important role in the development of dance as an art. The paths that these dancers took to reach greatness is worthy of study so that future generations can learn how to get the most from their own careers. This paper will analyse and draw inspiration from the artistic and growth characteristics of these two artists.

Keywords: Dai Ailian (戴愛蓮), Choi Seunghee (崔承喜), artistic expression, career path, career inspiration

1. Artistic expressions of Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee

1.1 The influence of nationalism

The careers of both Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee are both closely linked to the destinies of their respective countries of origin, China and Korea respectively. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Dai Ailian, who had returned to China, was deeply moved by the suffering of her people throughout the war. To express her own feelings about this ordeal she created a series of anti-Japanese war-themed dance works depicting images describing the war to resist Japanese aggression. These included works such as *Marches*, *Alert* and *Guerilla Story*.

Similarly in the Korean Peninsula, the period between 1926 and 1933 was characterised by strong resistance to the Japanese cultural domination during the Japanese colonial period and resulted in a period of revival of traditional Korean culture. Choi Seunghee reflected the social consciousness of the period through dance works created during that period. For example, her 1931 work “*The Road of Misery*” was about people living in poverty and “*Dance of the Free*” was descriptive of the anticolonial ideology of the people.

In the process of creating these dance works, Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee used body language to convey emotion, thought and will. In so doing, they touched the heart and soul of their respective nations and produced dance works which were profoundly rich both in content and cultural meaning.

1.2 Expressionism

The production of artistic works provides an artist with channels to express or vent their emotions and the inspiration often comes from observation of peoples lives and society as a whole. During this period of time, the Chinese and Korean dance circles were both strongly influenced by western dance styles, the greatest of which was ballet followed German modern dance, otherwise known as Expressionist dance.

Dai Ailian made use of expressionist techniques in creating the work called “*Air Raid*”, which truly expresses the weight of grief experienced due to a daughter’s eternal separation from her mother. In addition to dances expressing the cruelty of war, Dai Ailian also created works such as “*Weeping Willow*”, “*Nostalgia Song*” and “*East River*” which shine a light on feelings of homesickness, grief and anger experienced by her people at that time. At the same time, the creative activities of Choi Seunghee played a pioneering role in the performing arts in Korea. She was able to quickly adapt to cultural changes and trends. Her natural qualities and delicate emotion are clearly embodied in her characterisation and artistic style. Her noteworthy works include “*North Korea’s Mother*”, “*Before the Dawn*” and “*Sigh at One’s Fate*” Of these, “*North Korea’s Mother*” was the viral sensation of its time, with the start of the Korean War on 25 June 1950 as the backdrop, this work tells the story of a mother returning safely from a riot, this artwork calls for peace.

After many years of exploration and practice both dancers were able to reflect their expressionist ideas with their own unique creative styles. However, their expressive dance styles and their values of always caring about the people are an

excellent reference for the development of the art in general.

1.3 Feminist thought

Both dancers were influenced by foreign cultural ideas, but at that time there was still prejudice against women in both countries and society was still very conservative. Later, societies were influenced by modern western thought and ideas of women's liberation and gender equality started to flourish widely.

The 1954 Dai Ailan female pas de deux, "Flying high", is a classic. The dance uses ribbons and body shapes with smooth, gliding and leaping steps to create an artistic impression of soaring high in the sky while simultaneously expressing the beauty of women, their love for each other and their hope and longing for a better life. Choi Seunghee's thoughts were also not constrained by the prevalent societal concepts of Korea. She was exposed to new ideas and trends during her career and used this to strengthen the female perspective in her works highlighting the beauty of women. For example, her work "Bodhisattva Dance" is a rhythmic dance that reflects the beauty of the female body. At that time, most Korean women still wore very traditional clothing, by contrast the dancers wore costumes that displayed rather than concealed the dancers' bodies.

Artistic works are influenced by many factors experienced by the artist including exposure to different cultures, cultural literacy cultivated at home and adversity arising in the artist's daily lives. Both dancers experienced wars and other hardships during their careers, however they also formed new trends in dance thought, while passively reflecting the social and historical realities of the day and contributing to the awakening of new thinking. It can be said that the artist's background, societal conditions and the artistic direction are inseparable, which implies that culture reflects the prevailing political and social conditions.

2. Career features of Dai Ailan and Choi Seunghee

2.1 Determined to have a career in dancing

Dai Ailan and Choi Seunghee were both very assertive from a young age and they had clear career development goals and a love of dancing. They experienced various physical, mental and spiritual challenges to their dancing aspirations, but they always insisted that they would never be deterred from their dreams. Faced with difficulties in their studies they both did not hesitate to leave their familiar learning, living and language environment to continue their studies abroad.

In the face of domestic turmoil and prejudice, their sense of civic duty drove them to create art works reflecting their nationalism, expressionism, and feminism. To continue the development of the dancing arts, they actively spread dance concepts and ideas and cultivated dance successors. They established dance training classes and started dance education programs at various locations, which had an important influence in the field of dance.

2.2 Integrating advanced ideas, inspiring dance creations

Dai Ailan and Choi Seunghee began studying and practicing their art from childhood and received Western dance education early in life. During their time abroad they studied ballet and modern dance with some of the best teachers of the period. This study experience allowed them to systematically master the emotive methods and stage performance skills used by Western dancers at that time. On the advice of the German modern dancer, Mary Wigman, Dai Ailan studied abroad in the UK where she honed her professional skills. She broke the shackles of traditional thinking and boldly proposed that ballet and modern dance could learn from each other, both rising to new heights in terms of movement and artistic expression. After returning to China, in order to better restore national folk dances she went to Yaoshan, Kangding and other places in Guangxi to collect folk songs and get a taste for the traditions of the past. While consolidating the traditional dances of her own country she was able to combine the knowledge gained abroad with these traditional dances, laying a solid foundation for the creation of outstanding works of art.

Similarly, under the influence of Japanese dancer Ishii Baku, Choi Seunghee first came into contact dance as art, quickly becoming a fan. She then went to Japan to study the basics of modern dance and learn more dance theory. As a result, she not only inherited and conserved Korea's excellent dance tradition, but by travelling the world she also was able to gather more life experience and dance knowledge and bring this into her dancing.

2.3 An inheritance of dance, a snowball effect

Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee are not only famous dancers, but also remarkable educators. During her lifetime, Dai Ailian served as a school principal, team captain, group leader etc, she also held Laban dance notation classes. She was a founding member of China's new dance art movement. Under her tutelage, a steady stream of dancing talent flowed into dancing circles providing new impetus to the Chinese dance scene. This talent includes a large number of outstanding

dancers such as Xu Jie, Zi Huajun, Zhao Qing, Chen Ailian and Cui Shanyu.

Similarly, Choi Seunghee also loved education, she not only founded the first dance school in Pyongyang at that time, but also engaged in dance education in China. She trained many first-generation dancers and dance educators while teaching at the Central Academy of Drama, Dance Research Group. Her efforts played a pivotal role in the construction of classical Chinese dance.

3. Exploring the career progression of great dancers

3.1 Common traits amongst great dancers

3.1.1 Endurance and professional skills

The journey from being ordinary to being an outstanding professional dancer is an arduous one, dancers must endure comprehensive tests of body, will and ability. This journey requires the dancer to continually improve and polish their professional skills and abilities. The speed with which dancers progress may be affected by many factors. It requires extreme perseverance to push through the bodily pain, the long hours of practice, the mental burden, and the feelings of career stagnation.

Additionally, to really excel a dancer must have solid fundamental theoretical knowledge and dance skills. Dance theory is like a dancer's foundation, only by learning professional theory and understanding the historical development of various dances can they lay a solid foundation for their dancing. Only then are they empowered with the dancing skills and emotional expression to perform with a deep inner beauty.

3.1.2 Regular artistic exchanges, rich creative materials

Creative inspiration comes from daily life. Dance creation cannot be limited to a single perspective, art requires social exchanges, broad vision and the ability to go out into the world and bring that back to the stage.

Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee both studied abroad and leaned about foreign dance culture and philosophy. They managed to absorb foreign dance ideas, while not forgetting the special character of their national dance styles. After achieving some career success, they returned to grassroots by collecting folklore from various ethnic peoples which provided them with rich creative material.

They not only created many artworks, but also became champions of art. They were instrumental in the promotion and development of a booming domestic and foreign art industry, while enjoying world renown in the dance world.

3.1.3 Artistic expression and moral character

When compared to an ordinary dancer, the most important characteristic of a great dancer is their ability to perform with extremely strong artistic expression, this expressiveness stems from their love of dance.

Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee are both outstanding dancers in the history of their respective countries. They were able to refine the cultural essence of both Eastern and Western dance, combining local traditional dance with Western modern dance. They used expressionist ideas to the extreme in their dance routines and their achievements enjoyed an excellent reputation in international dance circles.

In addition to possessing the abovementioned dance related skills a great dancer should also have tremendous personal charisma and assume due social responsibilities. When Dai Ailian and Choi Seunghee found themselves living through national crises, they reflected the societal realities of the day and expressed their anger against injustice by producing through a number of patriotic Anti-Japanese works protesting the wars. When there was a shortage of dance talent in their respective countries they served as schoolteachers and principals, established dance training classes and contributed their lifelong energy to the dance business by cultivating further generations of outstanding talent.

3.2 Career progression of great dancers

3.2.1 Psychological dimension

Firstly, the dancer must have clearly defined learning goals and be confident. Every year, many dance lovers start dancing. Some people dance only because they are interested, others dance for physical fitness and other still regard it as a way to gain entrance to university, but very few of these become truly great dancers. Ultimately, the difference between these people is determination.

If a person wants to become a great dancer, they must formulate clear development goal. With becoming great as the ultimate goal, a dancer must set strict conditions with respect to the rate of professional studies, basic skills training and ability improvement. The dancer must also have firm resolve in the face of physical pain and the required training time required to reach the goal.

Secondly, the dancer should be able to richly express connotation and constantly accept and absorb exceptional dance

culture. There are various forms of artistic expression and any form of expression has its own unique connotation, this is also the case for great dancers who will express their own ideas and impressions. Great dancers must remain curious about new things, they must actively explore and discover, they must delve into the task of understanding and respecting other dance cultures and be willing to break bonds or norms. Creativity and inspiration happens in the exchange of ideas.

3.2.2 Professional dimension

Firstly, strengthen professional knowledge and solidly master professional skills. Dancing talent is different from ordinary people, but we often lose sight of the important role of personal initiative in the growth process, individual effort plays an important role in a dancer's progress to greatness. In addition to making practical achievements, an excellent dancer also needs to continuously grow their technical knowledge, improve their dancing awareness, and provide inspiration for the creation of new artworks.

Secondly, it requires continual training to become a leader in a professional field. On their way to becoming a great dancer, the dancer must polish their basic professional abilities through repetitive daily training. They can use compete with others to encourage practice and use dance competitions to constantly learn from other dancers, absorbing and improving through mutual comparison. At competitions they can find teachers who excel in their fields and update their dance thinking, growing rapidly because of more mentorship opportunities.

Only through these methods which polish their professional abilities can dancers show the uniqueness, strength, and excellence of their works.

3.2.3 Social dimension

Firstly, a great dancer must create popular works that have significant social impact or traction. Excellent works of art are the embodiment of the spirit of their respective times and naturally reflect contemporary society. Every great dancer has a representative work which is complemented, praised, and leaves a strong impression with audiences. The work results in positive social effects. But behind each of these representative works lies the result of a dancer's professional knowledge, a keen sense for art, rich creative materials, and the excellent performance skills. When creating artworks, every great dancer must use other works of excellence as a benchmark to produce a work with social meaning.

Secondly, a great dancer must take social responsibility and actively promote social progress. While the dancer must possess excellent dance quality, solid professional ability, and the potential to become an excellent dancer, they should also take the initiative assume social responsibility, by playing an active role in dance education, development etc. They can bring together art, country, and society towards a higher goal in promoting dance and helping the development of societies.

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