

The Feminized Male Lead Dancer

How Chinese TikTok Dances are Redefining Gender Roles

Julia Zhou

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her essay, Julia Zhou uses an **unconventional primary source** to argue that while male-led Chinese TikTok dances engage in gender subversion, they do so by operating within an artistic framework that welcomes innovation. To help readers engage with her analysis, Julia carefully **describes** key choreographic techniques, then **orients** readers to the significance of each technique. Having made the dances legible to her readers, she then engages in a rewarding **close reading** of their choreography.*

Excerpt

Once Mang Zhong and Li Ren Xing have established themselves within the Chinese Classical Dance (CCD) aesthetic framework, they are able to use the CCD framework for their own ends. These technical adaptations and interpretations are not unwelcome additions. Contrary to what its name might suggest, CCD is a relatively recent invention which welcomes innovation. As an institutionalized dance form, CCD did not emerge until the 1950's.¹ Thus, as Emily Wilcox observes, CCD is a “modern creation developed through a combination of research and innovation. It is not, nor does its practitioners typically claim to be, strictly preserved or reconstructed historical or folk forms.”² CCD is primarily defined by aesthetic rather than by technical content. Thus, a dance only has to evoke CCD's aesthetic and movement quality, rather than strictly adhere to a set of technical guidelines, to be considered a CCD and access its cultural scaffolding. By making unique additions and adaptations to the CCD framework, the videos Mang Zhong and Li Ren Xing introduce new movement vocabulary and syntax into the CCD canon, evolving the style to fit their creative needs.

Mang Zhong subtly but effectively misuses CCD dance techniques to expand upon CCD's existing gender expectations. The most striking example is when the dancers roll the fan between their two hands.³ In classic “tuan shan” technique, the fan is wielded as an extension of the dancer's hand and should always be directed outwards and parallel to the dancer's

¹ Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 2

² Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 2

³ TranScend全盛舞蹈工作室: 1:01-1:03, 2:10-2:12

forearms.⁴ Rolling the fan between two hands breaks this continuity in an unexpected way, demanding attention.



Figure 1. An example of the newly introduced “rolling” motif.⁵

Mang Zhong also breaks the standard line of continuity between fan and arm when dancers angle the fan against their lips in a tutting motion. This motion builds upon the basic “tuan shan” technique of obstructing the face by introducing motion to the fan.^{6,7} In one specific instance, the dancers tut their lips while circling the courtyard, combining the 跑圆场 (pao yuan chang, circling the stage) technique of CCD with the newly created tutting extension of “tuan shan” technique.^{8,9} In this way, Mang Zhong choreography builds upon existing CCD techniques, subverting traditional expectations while not altogether discarding the tradition.

⁴ Xuejuan Feng, WeChat message to author, November 30, 2020.

⁵ TranScend全盛舞蹈工作室, 【全盛舞蹈工作室】惊艳四座♥《芒种》中国风爵士编舞MV|白小白choreography, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7abPwGbMD4>: 0:21

⁶ TranScend全盛舞蹈工作室: 0:20-0:21, 0:30-0:31, 1:30-1:37

⁷ Xuejuan Feng, WeChat message to author, November 29, 2020.

⁸ TranScend全盛舞蹈工作室: 1:30-1:37

⁹ Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 238.



Figure 2. Dancers tut the fan prop against their lips, creating a coy image.¹⁰

Li Ren Xing also expands upon the traditional CCD framework by synthesizing Wushu, modern, and jazz with feminine CCD technique. After the dancers strike a pose with their hands in the slightly curled 兰花指 (lan hua zhi, orchard fingers) shape, their feet pointed, legs slightly bent, they roll their head in a semi-circle.¹¹ The orchard fingers and slightly bent posturing in their legs are fashioned from CCD technique. Rolling their head is a jazz-style technique which generates an expansive presence. In this way, Li Ren Xing transplants elements from jazz dance to the CCD framework.

¹⁰ TranScend全盛舞蹈工作室: 1:30

¹¹ Kevin Shin, 《两人行》 《双面燕洵》 舞蹈: 0:07-0:09



Figure 3. Li Ren Xing dancers' beginning pose.¹²

Additionally, Li Ren Xing choreography intersperses the stable, neutral positions of Wushu with the soft, delicate positions of Chinese dance. The dancers move into a neutral position, with their legs turned out and opened to 90 degrees and their arms extended in a straight line.¹³ The position is taken from Wushu 弓步 (gong bu, bowed step). This bowed step conveys a strong sense of stability, deriving strength from the torso squared and balanced atop the legs. Whereas Chinese dance emphasizes a dancer's range of motion, often utilizing angled torso positions to produce soft and fluid shapes, this straight and steady position grounds and strengthens the otherwise delicate position. By incorporating new styles into the CCD framework, Li Ren Xing also introduces new movement vocabularies to provoke re-consideration of the norms and expected techniques within the CCD framework.

¹² Kevin Shin, 《丽人行》 《双面燕洵》 舞蹈: 0:07

¹³ Kevin Shin, 《丽人行》 《双面燕洵》 舞蹈: 0:10



Figure 4. An example of the dance's Wushu inspiration.¹⁴

This balance between tradition and subversion is important for normalizing content. While CCD techniques are fluid, the gender expectations of CCD are quite clear. There are multiple styles within CCD; each style carries its own gender expectations. Certain CCD styles like fan dance, water sleeves, shen yun, and tuan shan are usually performed by females. Other dance styles, acrobatics and sword, fall squarely into the wheelhouse of the male performer. Mang Zhong features a male lead in a “tuan shan” dance, typically a female CCD style. All of the CCD-dance styles performed in Li Ren Xing — shen yun, Dunhuang, Han — are also typically performed by female dancers. Since Mang Zhong and Li Ren Xing reference traditionally feminine CCD styles, the lead male dancers can be seen as directly challenging gender expectations within the genre. However, since both dances make efforts to respect and position themselves within the art form, they are still able to tap into the cultural capital associated with CCD and their source texts.

¹⁴ Kevin Shin, 《雨人行》 《双面燕洵》 舞蹈: 0:10

Author Commentary

Julia Zhou

My motive for Essay 3 was to contextualize two popular Chinese TikTok dance videos against the CCD “tradition” and their respective cultural backgrounds. These two videos — Mang Zhong and Li Ren Xing — stood out because they each featured a male dancer leading a very feminine dance. I wanted to argue that while Mang Zhong and Li Ren Xing might at first glance seem like subversive and radical gender performances, they are operating within an artistic framework which welcomes innovation and subversion. Thus, they are received as normatively beautiful by their viewers, especially viewers with some basic Chinese cultural background.

To make this argument, my evidence needed to be rooted in the visual elements of the dances. In the beginning, I was overwhelmed at the amount of sensory detail each video contained. Ultimately, I chose to focus on the video’s elements that related most closely with dance performance — the dancer’s costume, styling, and choreography (addressed by the excerpt above). To compile evidence, I watched each video through three times. First, I noted areas that resonated with CCD tradition. Next, I noted areas that contradict or synthesize different CCD traditions. Finally, I took detailed notes on the choreography itself. This way, the task of accumulating and analyzing evidence became more manageable and the notes were able to guide my argument.

Editor Commentary

Natalia Zorrilla

Ask a student for an example of a primary source, and she might mention a novel, or a newspaper article, or a database. If she's feeling daring, perhaps she'll suggest a film, or maybe a photograph. In the context of academic writing, these kinds of sources are the ones we tend to consider. In contrast, a TikTok dance video seems much more likely to be an object of distraction than an object of study. Yet it is this unconventional primary source that grounds Julia's writing, and it is her treatment of this source that makes her essay so noteworthy.

From the start of this excerpt, Julia recognizes that her readers may be unfamiliar with choreographic terminology, particularly the terminology of Chinese Classical Dance (CCD). With this unfamiliarity in mind, she works to make both of the TikTok dances she analyzes accessible to novice readers. In part, she accomplishes this goal through her nontechnical descriptions of specific techniques. Even a reader who has never seen the 弓步 (gong bu, or bowed step) position can imagine "a neutral position, with [dancers'] legs turned out and opened to 90 degrees and their arms extended in a straight line." Julia reinforces these careful descriptions with captioned screenshots of her videos, so readers can match the pictures in their mind's eye with the pictures on the page.

Even as Julia ensures that readers can picture the techniques she analyzes, she also orients readers to what these techniques are meant to convey. To understand how integrating Wushu into CCD changes the form, it is necessary to understand that Wushu's 弓步 (bowed step) position evokes stability, while CCD's movements tend to focus on fluidity. Importantly, Julia's orientation avoids overwhelming readers with excessive details about the dance forms. Instead, Julia provides readers with just enough background information to ensure that they can engage with her analysis.

Together, then, Julia's description and her orientation enable all readers to understand the complexities of her argument. These moves, although especially relevant to an unconventional source like Julia's, are essential to remember when analyzing any primary source. A reader who can comprehend the basic foundations of an argument is much more likely to be receptive to that argument.

From this position of understanding, readers can see Julia's essay for what it is: an excellent close reading of an unusual source. While her detail-grounded analysis is impressive on its own, it is all the more so because she has chosen such a detail-rich object of study. In a way, then, Julia's writing parallels the TikTok dances in her analysis. Julia's choice of primary

source, like the mixed techniques of her dancers, might initially be considered unconventional or even radical. However, just as the dancers draw from the familiar CCD framework, Julia draws on familiar language to help readers understand her source. Through this blend of new and old, both Julia and her dancers manage to create something beautiful.

Professor Commentary

Alexander Davis, Princeton Writing Program

Julia's Essay 3 work from our Writing Seminar was a masterclass in honoring the symbiotic relationship between motive and analysis. As this excerpt makes clear, both her motive and her analysis have separate and undeniable strengths. On the one hand, her research process intentionally excavated several compelling tensions and inconsistencies within her evidence—especially those operating between established artistic custom in Chinese Classical Dance and transgressions of that long-standing tradition. On the other hand, the attention to detail evident in her visual interpretation is equally stellar; several moments in these extracted body paragraphs pull our attention as readers (and viewers!) to meaningful details from each video which may have otherwise escaped our notice. But the real magic of Julia's essay comes in the moments where her multiple layers of motive and analytic appraisal are one and the same. Consider her penultimate paragraph on position. The interior sentences contend that a remarkable amount of strength and stability is communicated through a single "bowed step," so much so that one could imagine an entire paragraph—or essay subsection—devoted to parallel dissections of the video's tacit visual messaging. Yet what makes that position so notable is the even more surprising disruption it poses to the somatic status quo: in the words of the paragraph's exterior sentences, it epitomizes an interjection of "the stable, neutral positions of Wushu" into "the soft, delicate positions of Chinese dance," and in so doing, quietly "provoke[s] re-consideration of the norms and expected techniques." The effect, then, is a *jeté* not just from motive to analysis (and back again), but to thesis as well—because Julia's leap from media imagery to audience imaginary also scaffolds her final argument about the power of dance to normalize certain kinds of embodied gender transgression. In short, as *Motivating Moves* promises, this excerpt reveals just how important and interesting the seemingly insignificant details of visual media can truly be!

Works Cited

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Bios

Julia Zhou, '24 is a first-year from Herndon, Virginia, pursuing a major in either East Asian Studies or Economics. On campus, she is a member of Triple 8 Dance Company, Princeton US-China Coalition, and a research assistant for the Stewart Lab's Chinese propaganda project. In her free time, Julia enjoys dancing, taking long walks in nature, and spending time with her little sister. She wrote this essay as a first-year.

Natalia Zorrilla, '23 is a prospective Politics or Philosophy major from San Diego, California. Outside of the Writing Center, she serves as co-president for the Princeton College Democrats, competes on the Princeton Debate Panel, and writes puzzles for the annual Princeton Puzzle Hunt. She also advises high schoolers with the nonprofits Matriculate and HomeFront NJ, and she researches with the Concepts & Cognition Lab. In her free time, she winds down by solving crosswords and watching cheesy rom-coms. She wrote this as a sophomore.