



## THE IDEAL OF TEACHING: A TWENTY-YEAR REVIEW AND OUTLOOK ON “HIGHER EDUCATION DANCE” INSTRUCTION

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Received March 4, 2025; Revised June 24, 2025; Accepted July 3, 2025

### Abstract

In 1997, the prestigious Shaanxi Normal University and renowned Fujian Normal University pioneered the establishment of the innovative “Dance Education” major in higher normal universities in China. Since then, beginning in 1999, various prominent normal universities and diverse comprehensive universities across the country have successively introduced dance disciplines. The term “Higher Education Dance” refers specifically to specialized dance programs offered at higher normal universities and, more broadly, to comprehensive dance disciplines established in reputable universities. The twenty years since the graduation of the first cohort of dance undergraduates in the 21st century have witnessed the remarkable development of higher dance education. This paper aimed to provide a thorough review and discussion of the past two decades of dance education in higher normal universities, focusing on aspects such as training objectives, curriculum design, and teaching evaluation. In addition, this study also assessed the significant impacts and development of Higher Education Dance programs in China over the past two decades by analyzing graduates’ valuable academic experiences, career trajectories, and perceptions of the discipline. The research results were as follows: 1) Higher Education Dance programs effectively prepare graduates for teaching careers, though a small percentage transition to non-dance fields, highlighting a need for broader interdisciplinary training. 2) The curriculum structure aligns with national policies, integrating general education, dance training, and pedagogy, yet gaps remain in practical training and regional dance integration. 3) While urban universities offer better faculty and resources, less-developed regions face faculty shortages, infrastructure limitations, and student skill disparities, requiring policy support and curriculum improvements.

**Keywords:** Higher Education Dance, Talent Cultivation, Twenty Years, Review and Outlook



## Introduction

Over the past two decades, Higher Education Dance in China has evolved into a structured academic discipline that combines pedagogical training, theoretical research, and practical dance instruction. Unlike performance-centered conservatories, these programs emphasize interdisciplinary learning to prepare students for careers in education and the broader arts field. A key milestone was the establishment of the “Dance Education” major at Shaanxi Normal University and Fujian Normal University in 1997 and 1998, which marked the formal recognition of dance as an academic subject.

The 1998 Higher Education Law played a crucial role in enabling universities to institutionalize dance education. Before this, dance was typically taught within music programs, aimed at supporting music teacher training. Foundational scholars like Xie (1994) emphasized ethnic dance, technical training, and the integration of theory and practice. Huang Mingzhu later proposed an interdisciplinary structure that led to dance’s inclusion in national undergraduate programs.

As the field expanded, critical debates surfaced. A key issue is the tension between preserving traditional and ethnic dance forms and adapting to modern, often Westernized, aesthetics. This raises concerns about cultural identity and the homogenization of curricula. Scholars like Li et al. (2023) advocate for regionally adaptive curricula to preserve cultural diversity, while Huang (2003) highlights student-led projects that revive underrepresented folk traditions.

Theoretical discussions have also addressed the distinction between “ideal teaching” (pedagogical methods) and the “ideal of teaching” (broader cultural and social objectives). Foundational figures like Xie and Huang contributed to both domains. More recent work, including that of Chen (2003), urges a decolonial reorientation of dance curricula that moves away from Euro-American frameworks in favor of local philosophical and aesthetic traditions.

Innovation at the local level has increasingly shaped the field. Programs now integrate regional dance traditions like Shandong’s Drum and Yangko Dance, offering a bridge between national standards and local identities You et al. (2024). Institutional initiatives like the Regional Dance Revitalization Project (Zhang, 2023) further this mission. Simultaneously, global pedagogical trends are making an impact. Digital tools such as motion capture, VR rehearsal platforms, and online choreography systems are being incorporated into teaching practices (Cisneros et al., 2023; Zhao, 2022).

Today, Higher Education Dance in China stands as a mature and evolving discipline. To remain relevant, it must embrace diversity, engage with international discourse, and foster culturally grounded, critically reflective education.



## Research Objectives

The specific research objectives are:

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of Higher Education Dance programs in shaping graduates' career trajectories by examining their employment status, career transitions, and professional development over the past 20 years.
2. To assess graduates' perceptions of their undergraduate education and its alignment with professional training goals, focusing on the effectiveness of curriculum design, professional skills training, and theoretical knowledge acquisition in preparing students for dance-related careers.
3. To identify areas for improvement in Higher Education Dance education by analyzing graduates' feedback on curriculum structure, skill development, and regional cultural integration, with the goal of refining the future direction of the discipline.

## Literature Review

Higher Education Dance in China originated in the mid-1990s within music education programs at normal universities, initially designed to enhance the dance literacy of future educators. Xie (1994) played a formative role by emphasizing fundamental dance training, ethnic dance traditions, and theory-practice integration, which influenced early curriculum frameworks. In 1998, Huang Mingzhu helped formalize the discipline, advocating for an interdisciplinary structure that led to its official recognition within national undergraduate programs. By the early 2000s, dance had emerged as a distinct field of study, though the literature remained largely descriptive, lacking deep theoretical and critical engagement.

One of the central tensions in Chinese Higher Education Dance is the struggle between preserving traditional and ethnic dance forms and adopting modern, often Westernized, aesthetics. This reflects broader cultural and political questions concerning identity, power, and curriculum authority. Scholars such as Li et al. (2023) call for regionalized curricular approaches to resist cultural homogenization, while Yu et al. (2024) emphasize student-led performances as methods of reclaiming intangible cultural heritage. Although these strategies support artistic authenticity and student empowerment, they often encounter resistance due to institutional rigidity.

Another critique involves the dominance of Han-centric narratives within dance curricula, which may obscure or marginalize the voices and contributions of ethnic minorities. Scholars like Chen (2003) advocate for "curricular decolonization," proposing the integration of local philosophies and indigenous movement vocabularies,



particularly from underrepresented southwestern regions, to ensure more inclusive and equitable representation.

The debate also extends to the pedagogical structure of these programs. While technical proficiency remains a core component, there is growing concern that this focus may sideline critical thinking, theoretical depth, and research-driven practices. In response, Zhang (2023) observe a shift toward hybrid educational models that blend studio-based instruction with critical theory and social engagement, reflecting broader reforms in Chinese higher education.

As the field moves into a globally connected phase, it faces the challenge of aligning with international practices while preserving its cultural integrity. Comparative studies, such as those by Zhao (2022), identify opportunities for Chinese programs to embrace greater inclusivity and innovation. Huang (2003) highlights curriculum internationalization efforts that integrate global dance histories and foster bilingual scholarship.

Finally, digital transformation is reshaping pedagogy. Zhang (2024) explore the role of AI and motion-capture technologies in choreography and assessment, showing how technology can both support and complicate traditional teaching models. Moving forward, adopting interdisciplinary and globally informed approaches will be key to evolving Chinese Higher Education Dance into a reflective, inclusive, and forward-looking academic field.

## Conceptual Framework

The curriculum framework of these programs generally includes four core components:

1. General Education Courses, which align with national higher education regulations, incorporating subjects such as Marxist theory, pedagogy, and general humanities (Liu & He, 2022).
2. Dance Techniques and Theory, covering ballet, classical dance, modern dance, ethnic and folk dance, as well as dance history, aesthetics, and choreography (Li, 2013).
3. Teacher Training and Educational Pedagogy, integrating courses on curriculum design, teaching methodology, and classroom management to prepare students for careers in education (Xie, (1994).

4. Practical Training and Research, including field studies, artistic performances, and thesis writing, which enhance students' practical teaching abilities and research skills (Jin & Martin, 2019).

## Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact of Higher Education Dance programs on graduates' career trajectories and professional development.

### Step 1: Research Design and Participant Selection

The study focused on graduates from the 1997 and 1998 cohorts of Shaanxi Normal University and Fujian Normal University, selected for their over 20 years of professional experience. A total of 110 graduates participated, with 86.36% female and 13.64% male. Most enrolled between ages 16–19. Educational backgrounds included 34.04% from general high schools, 59.57% from secondary arts schools, and a small number from professional performance troupes.

### Step 2: Data Collection

A structured 22-question survey was distributed via WeChat Wenjuanxing. It covered six areas: personal background, reasons for choosing the major, employment history, curriculum evaluation, career development, and an open-ended section for feedback and suggestions.

### Step 3: Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with key findings presented in tables and figures (e.g., job placement, career changes, curriculum alignment). Qualitative responses were thematically analyzed, revealing common concerns such as curriculum gaps, skill development, regional dance integration, faculty shortages, and limited practical training. The combined data provide a comprehensive evaluation of program effectiveness and inform recommendations for future improvement.



## Results

### Summary of the Higher Education Dance Questionnaire Survey

#### (1) Overview and Objectives of the Higher Education Dance Questionnaire Design

Twenty years after the graduation of the 1997 and 1998 cohorts from Fujian Normal University and Shaanxi Normal University, a targeted study was conducted to evaluate the long-term impact of their Higher Education Dance experience. A 22-question survey was specifically designed and distributed to these graduates to ensure direct and accurate data collection. The survey explored six key areas: personal demographic information; perceptions of the dance major, including passion for the field and self-assessed competence; post-graduation employment, covering career expectations, initial job placements, and career paths; understanding of Higher Education Dance and its influence; evaluation of the undergraduate curriculum, with feedback on strengths and areas needing improvement; and reflections and future outlook, where participants provided open-ended suggestions for further development of the program.

#### (2) Summary of Feedback from the Higher Education Dance Questionnaire Survey

The Higher Education Dance questionnaire was distributed via the WeChat Wenjuanxing mini-program to graduates from the 1997 and 1998 cohorts of Shaanxi Normal University (SNU) and Fujian Normal University (FNU). This method ensured convenient access and a high response rate from participants. The survey aimed to gather comprehensive insights into the graduates' academic experiences, career development, and perspectives on the Higher Education Dance program.

Regarding demographics and enrollment background, the total number of surveyed graduates included 37 students from SNU's 1997 cohort (4 males, 33 females), 24 from the 1998 cohort (3 males, 21 females), 30 from FNU's 1997 cohort (5 males, 25 females), and 19 from the 1998 cohort (3 males, 16 females). The overall gender distribution was 86.36% female and 13.64% male, reflecting the typical demographics of dance education. Most students enrolled between the ages of 16 and 19. In terms of academic background, 34.04% came from general high schools, 59.57% from secondary arts schools, and a small number had experience in song and dance performance groups prior to university admission.

#### 2. Students' Perceptions of the Dance Major

Regarding their motivation for choosing the Higher Education Dance major, 74.47% of students cited genuine interest or passion for dance as their primary reason.



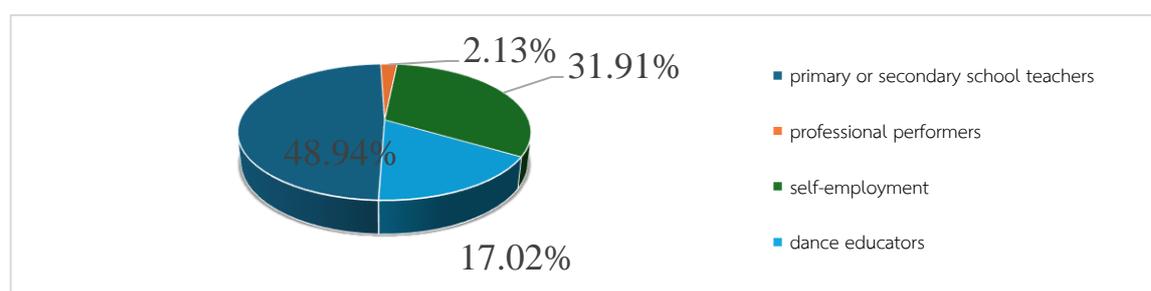
Another 14.8% chose the major due to academic pressure, while 6.38% were influenced by perceived career prospects. A few students selected the major as an alternative path after facing academic challenges in general education and opting for the art entrance examination route. Most students showed strong enthusiasm for the major, often practicing together in dance studios and actively participating in school rehearsals.

When asked to self-evaluate their professional abilities during their studies, the majority believed their skills were strong but still had room for improvement. A smaller group felt their abilities fully met their expectations, while a very small number rated themselves as average, acknowledging significant areas for growth. These findings suggest a generally confident and motivated student body, with awareness of both strengths and areas needing development.

### 3. Career Development Over 20 Years

Most graduates have become key teaching staff in schools or core professionals within organizations such as the China Dancers Association and various cultural institutions. Others have distinguished themselves as dance educators, organizers, theorists, choreographers, or researchers, contributing significantly to the development of the field. A few graduates have pursued entrepreneurship or transitioned into other industries, including administrative roles and business ventures—for example, by founding their own dancewear brands and companies.

Overall, the findings suggest that graduates from Higher Education Dance programs have enjoyed diverse and promising career paths, with many maintaining long-term involvement in dance education and related fields.

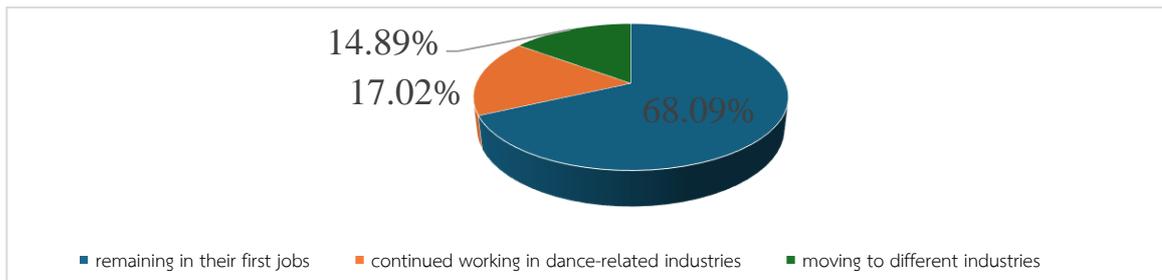


**Figure 1** Employment Status of Higher Education Dance Graduates in Their First Jobs After Graduation

Higher Education Dance graduates pursue diverse career paths, with 48.94% becoming primary or secondary school teachers, highlighting the program's strong focus on education. Another 31.91% transitioned into self-employment or other professional fields, demonstrating adaptability. Additionally, 17.02% secured positions

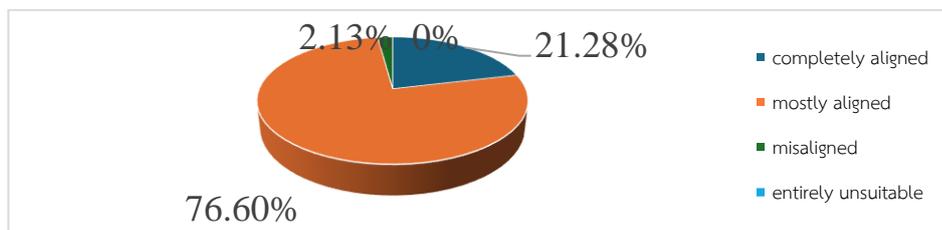


as dance educators in higher education, contributing to the field's academic growth. Only 2.13% pursued careers as professional performers, indicating that while performance remains an option, most graduates enter education, entrepreneurship, or multidisciplinary roles. This distribution reflects the program's emphasis on pedagogy and professional versatility.



**Figure 2** Career Changes of Higher Education Dance Graduates After Graduation

The career trajectories of Higher Education Dance graduates reveal a strong retention rate within their initial professions, with 68.09% remaining in their first jobs, indicating a high level of career stability and alignment with their original training. Meanwhile, 17.02% have experienced some job transitions but have continued working within dance-related industries, demonstrating the program's adaptability in preparing graduates for various roles within the field. In contrast, 14.89% have undergone significant career changes, moving into completely different industries, suggesting that while the program provides specialized training, some graduates seek alternative career paths beyond dance education and performance.



**Figure 3** Alignment of Undergraduate Courses with the Objectives and Training Goals of the Higher Education Dance Program

Higher Education Dance graduates largely found their coursework aligned with professional goals, with 76.6% stating it was mostly aligned and 21.28% believing it was completely aligned. Only 2.13% felt misalignment, and no respondents considered it entirely unsuitable, highlighting the program's effectiveness.



Open-ended responses offered valuable insights. Some graduates emphasized balancing practical and theoretical training as a key distinction from professional art institutions. Others noted slow program development and urged greater support from the Ministry of Education. Additionally, some suggested integrating regional characteristics to enhance cultural identity within the curriculum.

Overall, the survey results were highly positive, confirming the program's success in meeting educational objectives while also identifying areas for further improvement, particularly in regional specialization and institutional growth.

## Discussion

### 1) Review and Analysis of the Higher Education Dance Program Development

This study evaluated the effectiveness of Higher Education Dance programs in China in preparing graduates for professional careers and meeting practical demands. Unlike conservatories, these programs focus on teacher training, interdisciplinary learning, and holistic development. Survey data showed 72.34% of graduates felt their education significantly influenced their careers, and 76.6% believed the curriculum aligned with professional needs. However, 2.13% reported gaps in practical training and regional dance integration, raising concerns about standardized curricula overlooking cultural diversity. Scholars advocate regionally adaptive models to preserve heritage, while recent research highlights the need to integrate dance with education, health, and technology to meet evolving demands without losing core objectives.

### (2) The Ongoing Evolution of Ideal Teaching

Despite the growth of Higher Education Dance programs in China, challenges remain in achieving the ideal of teaching. Access is limited in non-art institutions, where dance is often extracurricular. Faculty distribution is uneven, with urban universities attracting experienced instructors and rural areas facing shortages. Gendered teaching approaches, diverse student backgrounds, and inadequate infrastructure—such as limited studio space and poor rhythm training—further hinder instruction. Internationally, immersive technologies like motion capture and 360-degree holography are enhancing dance education Cisneros et al. (2023). While some institutions integrate regional folk dance to promote cultural heritage, others adhere strictly to national standards, neglecting ethnic diversity.

### (3) Long-Term Career Outcomes and Program Impact

Career data demonstrate the lasting impact of Higher Education Dance programs in China. Most graduates (68.09%) remained in their first jobs, showing strong career stability, while 17.02% changed roles within the dance field and 14.89% entered



other sectors, underscoring the value of transferable skills. Professionally, 48.94% became school teachers, 17.02% entered higher education, 31.91% pursued interdisciplinary or entrepreneurial paths, and only 2.13% became full-time performers, reflecting a trend toward hybrid careers (Risner, 2012). Additionally, 76.6% of graduates felt their coursework mostly aligned with career needs, 21.28% found full alignment, and 2.13% identified gaps in practical training, theory, and regional content. These outcomes support calls for better integration of pedagogy and practice in arts education (Peng, 2023). Although foundational goals have been met, continued progress requires addressing structural issues, integrating graduate feedback, and aligning with global educational trends.

### **Body of Knowledge**

The article provides an analysis of the academic experiences and career trajectories of graduates from the 1997 and 1998 cohorts of Higher Education Dance students at Fujian Normal University and Shaanxi Normal University. It examines how these programs align with national education policies, emphasizing teacher training, interdisciplinary education, and the balance between general education and specialized dance training. A 22-question survey was conducted, covering demographics, motivations for choosing the dance major, perceptions of the curriculum, career development, and suggestions for improvement. The findings indicated that most graduates chose the major due to a passion for dance and pursued diverse career paths, with many becoming educators, theorists, choreographers, or entrepreneurs. While the majority remained in dance-related fields, some transitioned to other industries. Graduates generally expressed satisfaction with the curriculum's alignment with career goals, though they offered suggestions for enhancing both practical and theoretical aspects of the program. Overall, the survey showed positive outcomes, with many graduates enjoying successful careers within dance and related fields.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study confirm that Higher Education Dance programs in China have largely achieved their intended objectives, particularly in teacher training and interdisciplinary professional development. These achievements resonate with global trends in arts education, where there is an increasing emphasis on cultivating reflective educators, integrating theoretical knowledge with practical skills, and promoting cross-disciplinary learning. Nonetheless, challenges persist in areas such as



institutional accessibility, faculty qualifications, infrastructure, and the integration of regional dance traditions into standardized curricula. Comparable issues are found in dance education systems worldwide, including disparities in resource distribution, faculty development, and balancing cultural specificity with academic consistency. Addressing these challenges through strategic policy reforms, targeted resource investment, and curriculum innovation will not only strengthen China's Higher Education Dance programs but also position them for productive engagement in international dialogues. This broader perspective allows for mutual learning and the co-development of best practices in dance education on a global scale.

## Suggestion

From the results of the research, the researcher has the suggestions as follows:

### 1. Suggestions from the Research

The study assessed the effectiveness of Higher Education Dance programs in shaping graduates' careers. Findings show most graduates stayed in dance-related professions, mainly in teaching. However, some transitioned out of the field, highlighting the need for more flexible career training. Universities should integrate interdisciplinary courses in entrepreneurship, arts management, and digital dance, while collaborating with cultural organizations and international networks to expand job opportunities.

Regarding curriculum alignment, most graduates found their coursework relevant, but gaps in practical training and regional dance integration were noted. Institutions should enhance hands-on performance opportunities, field research on regional dances, and applied teaching experiences. The Ministry of Education should balance standardization with regional adaptations to preserve local dance traditions.

Key challenges include faculty shortages, infrastructure limitations, and inconsistent student preparation. To address these, government agencies should invest in faculty development, improve dance facilities, and bridge student skill gaps. Universities should also implement exchange programs and faculty training initiatives to ensure high-quality dance education nationwide.

### 2. The suggestions for future research (must relate and further develop from this research article)

Based on the findings of this study, future research should explore the following areas to further develop Higher Education Dance education and policy implementation:

#### 2.1 Research on Interdisciplinary Career Pathways for Dance Graduates



Since a percentage of graduates have transitioned into non-dance careers, future research should investigate alternative career pathways for dance graduates, such as arts administration, creative industries, digital media, and interdisciplinary performing arts careers. This would help institutions design curricula that better support career adaptability.

### 2.2 Comparative Analysis of Regional Dance Education Models

While some universities have successfully integrated regional dance forms into their curriculum, others have not. Future studies should conduct comparative analyses between institutions that emphasize regional dance education and those that do not, assessing the impact on student engagement, employment outcomes, and cultural preservation efforts.

### 2.3 The Role of Technology and Digital Innovation in Higher Education Dance

With advances in virtual reality (VR), motion capture, and AI-assisted choreography, future research should explore how digital tools can enhance dance education. Studies should assess the effectiveness of digital training environments, such as 360-degree projection-based dance studios and online dance education platforms, in improving student learning and career opportunities.

These research directions will contribute to the continuous improvement of Higher Education Dance programs, ensuring that they remain relevant, adaptive, and effective in preparing students for the evolving professional landscape.

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