THE DYNAMICS OF INTENTIONAL SPACE: EXPLORING GUANGCHANGWU PARTICIPANTS AND SPATIAL SUBVERSION IN LARGE GROUP DANCE PRACTICES

Abstract

This essay delves into the intricate relationship between space, place, and intentional spatial practices, particularly in the context of guangchangwu, a large group movement practice in China. By examining the concepts of space and place, as well as their role in creating intentional space, this paper explores how participants in guangchangwu subvert and redefine space to suit their own purposes. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and two case studies, this essay seeks to illuminate the ways in which individuals engage with and transform spatial environments through collective dance practices.

Key Words: Place, Space, Group, Practice, Subversion, Public, Private, Intentional, Women, Guangchangwu

Introduction: What is Guangchangwu?

Guangchangwu (广场舞), often translated in English as "square dancing," is a large group dance practice often performed in public spaces that holds a significant place in Chinese culture, serving as a vibrant expression of community, social cohesion, and physical activity. Originating in the late 20th century, guangchangwu has become a ubiquitous feature of urban and rural landscapes across China, attracting participants of diverse ages, backgrounds, and social status. But guangchangwu is more than just dancing in large groups in public squares. A closer examination of the historical origins and cultural importance of guangchangwu establishes a foundation for a more profound examination of its spatial dynamics and the methods by which participants interact with and reshape public areas through shared dance activities.

Guangchangwu represents a distinct cultural phenomenon in China that goes far beyond one simple description. Often translated as "square dancing," this translation fails to capture its unique characteristics and cultural significance. Guangchangwu is

specifically characterized by organized group dance activities that combine traditional Chinese dance elements, contemporary movements, and distinct spatial practices, typically led by designated dance leaders and performed to a specific repertoire of music. Emerging during China's post-reform era (1990-2008), coinciding with government initiatives promoting public health and community engagement, it has grown in popularity and diversity. But what distinguishes guangchangwu from other forms of public dance is its specific historical lineage, particularly its connection to *yangge* (秧歌), a traditional folk dance from the Song Dynasty, and its incorporation of distinct movement patterns like the cross step (jiao cha bu 交叉步), three steps (san bu cai 三步踩), and the ten crosses (shi zi bu 十字步).

Unlike spontaneous or informal group dancing, guangchangwu follows structured patterns and has been formally recognized by Chinese governmental institutions. In 2015, the state codified specific guangchangwu practices through the "12 Public Square Dance Workout Routines" (十二套广场健身操舞), establishing official guidelines that separate this practice from other forms of public dance activities. The practice has become institutionalized within Chinese society, receiving official support from multiple government ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, the General Administration of Sport, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs. This institutional recognition further separates guangchangwu from other forms of public dance activities, establishing it as a distinct cultural practice with specific social and political implications.

The social organization of guangchangwu provides another key distinguishing factor. Participants gather in discrete groups, each following a designated leader, with clear internal hierarchies and social structures. This organized approach differs from

casual group dancing or spontaneous public performances. While there may not be physical boundaries between groups, each maintains its distinct identity through music choice and dance style. The music selection for guangchangwu is also distinctive, featuring a carefully curated blend of Chinese folk songs, revolutionary-era melodies, contemporary Chinese pop, and specially composed guangchangwu music. This musical foundation, combined with standardized choreography and movement vocabulary, creates a clear demarcation between guangchangwu and other forms of public dance activities.

In more recent years, Guangchangwu has also developed its own cultural hybrid identity, creating what theorist Homi Bhabha terms a "third space" - neither purely traditional nor entirely modern, neither fully public nor private. This hybrid nature distinguishes it from other forms of group dancing, as it represents a specific cultural phenomenon that emerged from China's unique social and political context.

In essence, guangchangwu represents a specific cultural practice with defined characteristics, institutional recognition, and distinct spatial and social organizations. While it may share some surface similarities with other forms of public dance activities which are often included under the umbrella of guangchangwu, its unique combination of traditional elements, standardized practices, and cultural significance establishes it as a distinct phenomenon in contemporary Chinese society. Spatially, while guangchangwu originated in public squares, it has evolved to claim what scholars’ term "intentional spaces" - areas that participants deliberately transform through their dance practice. These spaces may include parking lots, sidewalks, and streets, but the practice maintains its distinct identity through consistent movement vocabulary, group organization, and cultural practices, regardless of location. However, this very distinctiveness has

sometimes led to controversy, particularly in urban areas where the practice's specific characteristics - regular gathering times, amplified music, and large group formations - have sparked conflicts with residents. These tensions highlight how guangchangwu's features set it apart from more casual or spontaneous forms of public dance activities as well as how the practice utilizes spatial subversion.

The concept of intentional space

The concept of intentional space is believed to have originated in the late 19th century, with the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (2008). Heidegger argued that the physical environment can be used to create an atmosphere of intentionality, which can be used to shape the behavior of those who inhabit it. Heidegger's theory of intentional space is based on the idea that space is not an empty void or physical environment, but rather a place that is filled with meaning and purpose. He argued that space is an intentional environment, meaning that it is shaped by our intentions and expectations. That space, Heidegger argued, is a dynamic environment, constantly changing and being shaped by our intentions and expectations. Such a space is a place of potential where individuals and communities can create and explore new possibilities. Heidegger's theory of intentional space is a powerful tool for understanding how we interact with our environment and how our environment shapes us. It provides a framework for understanding how the intentions and expectations of guangchangwu participants shape the spaces they inhabit, and how this environment shapes their behavior and understanding of the world.

Most people are aware of intentional space, even if they are unable to label or recognize intentional space. For example, in the design world, the concept of intentional

space is based on the idea that the environment in which people interact has a significant impact on their behavior and attitudes. Intentional space can refer to the physical idea of creating space or the virtual or implicit environment, both of which are designed to foster a particular type of behavior or attitude. Intentional spaces can be used to promote collaboration, creativity, learning, or other desired outcomes amongst participants who gather there and can be created in a variety of ways, including through the use of physical design or elements such as lighting, structures or amenities, as well as through the use of the environment. Intentional space can be physically demarcated by fences or walls. Or in other cases, such as guangchangwu, the boundary is delineated by association in place and space.

The meaning of place and space in guangchangwu

For this article, I use the terms "place" and "space" when referring to parks, squares, sidewalks, and streets or anywhere else participants of guangchangwu engage in their dance practice. A clarification of the meaning of place and space is therefore necessary. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau distinguishes space from place (1974). De Certeau explains that "a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence;" a place is thus "an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability" (1974, 117). For example, my university, Texas Woman's University (TWU), is a place. Located in the city of Denton, Texas, it is a collection of physical structures made of durable materials. It is a campus with buildings that hold colleges, departments, and programs, each with their own organizational framework for staff, faculty, and students. These elements of the university are deliberately ordered and designed to assist with the functioning of the education process in this place. A public place therefore refers to a

park, square, sidewalk, or street built by the government for use by the population. These public places are relevant to the practice of guangchangwu because political and historical influence are literally built into them. For example, one only has to say *Tiananmen Square* to conjure images of the protest and the square itself.

Contrary to place, De Certeau explains that space "is composed of intersections of mobile elements" (1974, 117). On any given day, TWU is a space. It is composed of students learning, sleeping, or texting, in the classroom, speakers calling out to the crowds on the mall, teachers hurrying to office hours, delivery trucks moving across campus streets, etc. Though the university is designed as a place for education, that is not what always occurs in the space of the classroom, the space of the mall. Or sometimes, it is exactly what occurs. In this sense, "space is a practiced place" (de Certeau 1974, 117). De Certeau's definition of active space distinguishes it from a stable notion of place. The practice of guangchangwu generates a distinctive space through the large number of dancing bodies, loud music, and movement, which is not necessarily what the space was designed for.

Distinguishing between space and place in this way is important, especially when considering the relationship between space, power, and social relations. For large dance practices like guangchangwu, the meaning of space is a product of organization and the social transactions and experiences that occur in public places, both currently and historically (Soja 1989, 80). Guangchangwu participants and their dance practice, affected by the spaces they inhabit, can thus be explored to understand how both space and place are constructed, organized, and imbued with power. Foucault maintains that "power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of

bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (1977, 4). Roxanne Mountford further argues that "Spaces have heuristic power over their inhabitants and spectators by forcing them to change both their behavior . . . and, sometimes, their view of themselves" (1996, 50). Consideration of the relationship between spatial/social organization in public places, assists in exploring and describing how intentional spaces are maintained or constructed in guangchangwu.

The dynamic nature of power and space is important to the discussion of guangchangwu. Foucault maintains that power is relational and at no time and in no place are power relations stable (1977). This instability leaves room for resistance, particularly when considering guangchangwu's use of public space and how the participants reclaim space through dance. Recalling de Certeau's assertion that space is dynamic, relational, and variable, a space may be designed for a certain practice, but the actual use of the space is not determined by the construction of places. At any moment, spaces are alive with the potential for social interpretation and use. Guangchangwu practitioners alter the idea and meaning of the spaces they utilize in their practice through intention. Their dancing revision, or re-interpretation of space, allows guangchangwu practitioners to subvert places such as parks, streets, and sidewalks, for their own personal and group needs, intentionally changing the space from its proposed function in order to support their activities.

How guangchangwu participants create intentional space

Everyday expressions of space are fundamental to a discussion of guangchangwu and the production of intentional space. Space is a relation between us and the things of

the world which we discover in and through the world that is always already there. Spaces may receive their being from locations, physical distances derivative of rudimentary modes of relatedness, yet space is not reducible to objectivity, nor is it purely subjective. To demonstrate the production of intentional space, it is necessary to discuss how guangchangwu participants utilize the related characteristics of *nearness*, *regions*, and *aroundness* in their dance practice.

In guangchangwu, the characteristic of nearness does not concern objective presence in physical space, rather the relationship between guangchangwu dancers. When guangchangwu dancers are concerned with and aware of other guangchangwu participants, those participants are near to one another. Conversely, observers or people passing through fail to concern guangchangwu participants and become remote, thus establishing a boundary between who is a participant and who is not. This boundary, or nearness, establishes a region, a place where guangchangwu dancers gain a sense of belonging and purpose. A region is defined by its' usefulness to inhabitants. A guangchangwu participant's inclusion in the space in which the dancers gather thus becomes a totality of interconnectedness, providing the context for the relevance of the guangchangwu participants as a group. The region of a gathering of guangchangwu participants constitutes the group's aroundness. Aroundness concerns the relative location within a given region, in this instance a group of guangchangwu participants, in which concepts such as *above*, *below*, *behind, before, back*, and *front* produce a dimensionality, or boundary, of a disclosed space. These three characteristics of space - nearness, region, and aroundness - define and constitute a guangchangwu group. Since guangchangwu

groups gather to participate in a large group dance practice, any space occupied by guangchangwu participants becomes intentional space.

Additionally, guangchangwu participants emphasizes the importance of intentional space in relation to the dancers to create a more physical sense of order and hierarchy between the dancers. The dancers order themselves in a linear formation, with the more experienced dancers at the front and the beginners at the back. This arrangement allows the experienced dancers to lead the movements and provide guidance to the beginners. The intentional space between the dancers allows for a more dynamic and aesthetically pleasing performance, as the movements of each dancer can be seen more clearly. This intentional spacing also allows for more complex and intricate movements, as the dancers can move independently without worrying about running into each other. This is often done by using the space to create shapes, lines, and patterns, as well as by using the space to create a sense of energy, using quick movements, or a sense of stillness and calm. Guangchangwu participants, through the creation of intentional space, utilize the space around them to their advantage through the use of public space in parks by engaging with the surrounding environment. Guangchangwu participants use the space with intention to create a sense of connection within their distinct group, to differentiate from other groups, and to define the boundaries between their group and others.

Conclusion

Guangchangwu, as a third space, offers a unique opportunity to engage with a diverse population of women who exists within a dance practice community through the concept of intentional space. While large dance practices have been explored by many scholars and practitioners in the field of dance, guangchangwu participants' use of intentional space is interesting in the development of meaningful relationships and

creating a sense of belonging and acceptance within the groups. Regardless of whether guangchangwu participants recognize space as intentional, their use of nearness, regions, and aroundness serves as a signal to society of the group's intent to reclaim space through dance for their own purpose.

Large group dance practices are beneficial for a variety of reasons. They provide an opportunity for dancers to come together and share their experiences and ideas. Additionally, they can help foster collaboration and creativity, as dancers are able to draw on the collective knowledge and experience of the group. The inception of intentional space enables large group dance practices such as guangchangwu to provide a safe and supportive environment, creating a sense of belonging and an opportunity for dancers to come together and share their experiences and ideas. Guangchangwu and intentional space, working together, ensure that space is maintained, helping to foster a sense of community and celebration among dancers, which can be invaluable for the development of their dancing practice.

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