

Evaluation and Reflection on Chinese Acting Education from Students' Perspective

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Abstract: Chinese undergraduate acting training is very systematic. Nearly all the professional courses of Chinese acting majors are fixed and uniform, according to this standard system. The courses are divided into four categories: vocal, physique, lines, and acting. All undergraduate students majoring in acting study these courses for four years. This research will explore the curriculum and training patterns of the relatively uniform Chinese acting education and training system. What do students think about the acting training they have received? How does this training system impact students' acting careers after graduation?

Keywords: Chinese undergraduate system; Acting training; Vocal; Physique; Lines; Acting; Evaluation; Reflection; Students

1. Introduction

1.1 Acting

Acting classes constitute the primary course of undergraduate acting training in China. With no doubt, for students majoring in acting, it is absolutely the most immediate and practical course. During the interviews, “fundamentals” and “traditions” are the two concepts mentioned frequently by the respondents about acting classes. Respondents, either in screen acting or stage acting, have concluded that the acting curriculum has significantly contributed to the development of a well-grounded concept of acting. Moreover, the acting classes which are taught from a superficial level to an in-depth level have prepared them with a very firm foundation for their future work.

However, such a “foundation” carries a certain limitation, which stems from the traditional curriculum of acting. As mentioned previously, despite the availability of different acting academies in China and the existence of distinct training orientations for both screen acting and stage acting, the approach to undergraduate acting training in China is vastly similar. Furthermore, there has been no timely adaptation or innovation in the curriculum and teaching mode in many years. As a whole, acting academies follow a fixed curriculum, leaving no opportunity for students to choose their own courses or focus. Additionally, other than the aforementioned Stanislavski's experiential approach as the basis for acting classes, there is no other systematic acting approach offered to students in Chinese undergraduate acting academies, which runs counter to the growing internationalization of the Chinese acting market. As a result, some of the respondents have argued that the acting training they received is overly conventional and conservative, which has directly caused them to realize that their school studies are far too basic to fulfill the market's expectations for actors upon entering the workforce.

In turn, several respondents expressed the view that their acting classes have prepared a solid foundation for them in their future work. This foundation is of limited benefit in the real world, however, without the accumulation of real-world practical experience, which served as the key to their development in their respective fields.

“Novel adaptation” and “character observation and imitation” are the two acting stages that were most mentioned by respondents in interviews, and the ones that most respondents recognized as being the most beneficial to them in their future acting work. The character observation and imitation stage requires students to create a story through their own observation of individuals around them, followed by creating a story revolving around that character via their own imagination, and ultimately presenting it on stage as a theatrical production. Throughout the entire creative process, students are challenged to develop their own imagination and keen observation skills. Many of the respondents commented that this stage served as a process to accumulate “acting material” for themselves. They felt that the experience acquired during this stage prepares them for a better life foundation in acting as they take on more diverse roles in the future^[1].

With regard to the novel adaptation stage, students are expected to pick a novel of their choice by reviewing Chinese and foreign novels. Subsequently, from this novel, an excerpt is chosen and adapted into a theatrical piece to be presented on stage. This stage performance requires the students to compose, direct and act independently. As a whole, the training process can be very comprehensive regarding the development of students' professional skills. It contributes to the development of favorable reading habits among students. Reading capacity is the most elementary ability that an actor should possess for script analysis and character analysis. A part

of the novel adaptation stage also resides in desk work, where students are required to read all sorts of novels non-stop. Afterwards, the novel is analyzed, followed by the adaptation process, which requires the adaptor to delve deeply into the story and characters. As indicated by the respondents, their reading and script analysis skills developed at this stage serve as a very valuable contribution to their future acting endeavors. On the other hand, given that the students are obliged to compose, direct and act a theatrical piece on their own, this is not only for the enhancement of acting capabilities, but also for the cultivation of overall professional competence.

When it comes to acting classes, it is interesting to note that many of the traditional acting phases were described as “old-fashioned/old-school” or “not very beneficial” by the respondents. However, the novel adaptation stage and the character observation and imitation stage, both of which constitute the conventional “foundation” of training, have received the highest positive evaluations. It is obvious that these stages have nurtured the overall quality of the acting students, allowing them to exercise their diverse abilities in the field of acting and giving them the freedom to create. More importantly, this stage of training truly corresponds to the “practical” professional skills required by the respondents.

1.2 Lines:

In contrast to the other three courses, the lines course earned the highest positive feedback in this survey. Actors in both screen and stage directions have commented very highly on the role that lines classes have played in their ongoing work, in which the basic professional skills acquired from lines classes have contributed very positively to their profession.

Wang (2018, p. 26) remarked that the basic lines course serves as a crucial language course in stage acting and features a core role in narrating story backgrounds, conveying emotions and rendering atmospheres. Lines, which include narration, dialogue between actors, character monologues, etc., are used as the basis for the acting to be able to be demonstrated at a higher level, and for the plot to be steadily developed (Wang 2018, p. 26). The emphasis on lines classes in undergraduate acting training appears to be extremely high.

For respondents who are pursuing a career in stage acting, the most likely career they will enter immediately after graduation is in the theatre industry. There is no doubt that stage acting and lines are inseparable. After graduation, respondents in the field of stage acting, be it in an audition, or in a theatrical troupe, are most likely to exhibit their professionalism through their lines. To a large extent, the professionalism of a theatre actor is largely determined by the demonstration of their competence in line delivery. As a result, for stage actors, the lines education they receive in their undergraduate acting training has been instrumental to their future work. Likewise, respondents in the screen acting field also expressed the view that the foundation they acquired in the lines classes has proven to be a great advantage in their work. As opposed to the theatre industry, there are no stringent requirements for professional training in the film industry. Even non-professional individuals can access the screen acting industry. For students who have already undergone acting training, their mastery of lines is a strength that showcases their professional competence.

So, despite the curriculum following the traditional Chinese acting training model, just like was seen in the acting classes, the training in lines classes provides more assistance to actors in distinguishing their professional competence, or expertise. This mastery of a professional skill not only facilitates the immediate and effective application of the actors in the workplace, but also constitutes a unique advantage in an increasingly competitive workplace. Consequently, the “skillfulness” and “practicality” of lines training proved to be the main reason respondents reported positively about their lines training.

1.3 Physique

Judging from the interviews, the general evaluation of physique classes in Chinese acting training tends to be negative. Such negative evaluations came from respondents from both screen and stage acting orientations. Some respondents have attributed these negative feelings to the curriculum. The training content of physique classes is dominated by students learning different types of Chinese and foreign dances in different semesters, such as ballet, folk dance, jazz, and contemporary dance. According to respondents, the training in physique classes is separated from the acting curriculum and never considered physique class training to be a direct aid to improving their acting. Especially in their future work, the content learned in physique classes was not fully utilized. A proportion of respondents regarded physique classes as relatively unfair to students without basic dance fundamentals.

As Chinese undergraduate acting education is class-based, students in a class are taught together for the entire four years of their major. For example, in physique classes, students with different levels of dance skills in a class are trained together. There will be students with relatively strong and weak dance fundamentals in the class. Everyone receives the same training, yet students have no choice of different course levels based on their abilities. The gap is gradually widened. Students who are less well grounded in dance may gradually lose their self-confidence and develop a negative attitude towards physique classes as the training progresses. Furthermore, students with certain dance fundamentals tend to score higher in exams each semester. This somewhat unfairly discourages students who have little or no dance foundation. As noted in these interviews, these respondents have lost more self-confidence in physique during their college training, which directly leads them to categorize physique as a “vulnerability” in their future work, and to perceive themselves as potentially incompetent in this area. As a result, the physique classes are not seen as beneficial in any way in future work situations.

On the other hand, some respondents have argued that given the increasing requirements for actors in the acting market, it is advantageous for their future career to master one more skill. Moreover, it is possible to help acting students cultivate a favorable temperament through the dance training, which enables actors to be more physically coordinated in the acting, and their movements can be relatively fluent and graceful. These are the advantages of physique training.

However, owing to the short duration of the physique classes, there is no time for students to master or excel in this talent and make it available to them, in particular for those with no dance background. For those students who are inherently talented in dance, they are competent even in the absence of the physique classes. As a result, this directly contributes to the view of most respondents that the physique classes are less “practical” for them. Therefore, the course was negatively evaluated.

1.4 Voice

In contrast to the other three major courses, the overall evaluation for voice classes by respondents was very negative. The main reason for this is quite similar to that of physique classes, which is the content of the curriculum. Respondents have generally perceived that this traditional voice teaching curriculum is unrelated to their acting major. The content of voice classes consists of learning some basic bel canto or folk singing techniques and instructing students to prepare a piece of music independently. Such a traditional approach to teaching is of little help to acting majors in their acting training or in their future careers. It can be considered that the voice classes are an independent major course completely separated from the other three major courses. For students in stage acting, the traditional singing style is rarely or almost never presented in their future work, as they are primarily oriented towards stage acting. For screen acting students, regardless of whether they are auditioning or working on a production, the traditional training received in voice classes fails to help them distinguish themselves as professionals and enhance their careers^[2].

The course content has been taught in the traditional way rather than being updated in response to changing times or student needs, causing a disconnect with the real world. In addition, the short duration of the voice classes has prevented students with no voice foundation from mastering the skill well, gaining only a “general” understanding until the end of the course. In contrast, the course content is too superficial for students who already possess a foundation in voice. It does not help them to further improve this skill to add to their existing foundation either, which contributes to the high negative comments received.

2. Conclusion

As previously discussed, undergraduate acting training in China consists of four professional courses, including voice, lines, physique, and acting. Judging from the general training content, the respondents have commonly agreed that this systematic training enables them to develop a favorable approach and concept of acting.

However, the majority of such positive evaluations derived from the two professional courses of acting and lines in the curriculum, whereas a relatively negative evaluation of both voice and physique lessons was presented by the overall respondents. The underlying reason for this arises more from the respondents’ value of the “practicality” of courses. In their opinions regarding their acting training, virtually all respondents highlighted “direct accessibility” and “foundational skills” as key elements that would be beneficial in their current careers. In this respect, the acting course is undoubtedly the one that is most directly relevant to their current careers. Throughout the curriculum, the most closely connected to the acting course is the lines class, specifically the “monologue” and “dialogue” training in the latter period of the course, which is presented in close conjunction with the acting and vocal training^[3].

On the contrary, due to the curriculum design, the voice and physique courses demonstrate their “independence” from other courses to some extent and their content fails to be closely connected to the main course of acting. Vocal classes primarily concentrate on singing, and physique classes concentrate on different types of dances. However, the content of these courses plays no significant role in the practicality of the students’ work after graduation in acting. Furthermore, as supplementary courses, voice and physique usually cover two years (four semesters), a relatively shorter period of time as compared to acting classes. Last but not least, Chinese undergraduate education remains relatively conservative with regard to teaching content and teaching mode. Against the continuous advancement of the overall acting market in China, a majority of institutions fail to update their curriculum correspondingly to the market demand in a timely manner. As can be noticed in the interviews, most Chinese undergraduate acting academies have remained stagnant in the traditional teaching mode, with no timely update of content. This has resulted in a gap between recent acting graduates and the actual work available to them.

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