# From the Perspective of Contemporary Young People Talking about Chinese Square Dancing

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**Abstract:** Square dancing is a widely practiced public group dance activity in China, primarily involving middle-aged and elderly individuals. It serves as a form of physical exercise, social interaction, and cultural expression. However, despite its popularity, square dancing has become a source of social tension, particularly between different generations. Younger individuals often express concerns about noise pollution, space occupation, and aesthetic differences, reflecting broader urbanization challenges and shifting cultural dynamics. This study aims to explore contemporary young people's attitudes toward square dancing, analyzing the underlying social and psychological factors influencing their perceptions. Using a qualitative research approach, including in-depth interviews and discourse analysis, this study examines how generational differences, media representation, and urban public space dynamics shape youth perspectives. The findings suggest that while some young individuals appreciate the social benefits of square dancing, others perceive it as a disruption to their urban experience. This study contributes to the discourse on intergenerational cultural adaptation, offering insights into how cultural activities mediate social interactions in China's evolving urban environment.

## Introduction and Literature Review

*Background and Significance*

Square dancing emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as China underwent significant social and economic reforms, evolving from state-sponsored group exercises into a spontaneous cultural phenomenon predominantly embraced by middle-aged and elderly women (Chen & Li, 2019). The activity involves synchronized group dancing to music in public spaces such as parks, plazas, and residential areas. From its origins in collective fitness promotion campaigns of the post-Mao era, square dancing has transformed into a multifaceted social institution that now claims over 100 million regular participants nationwide (National Fitness Survey, 2022).

The historical trajectory of square dancing can be traced to several interrelated sources. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), collective dance activities, particularly "loyalty dances" and "yangge" folk dances, were promoted as expressions of revolutionary fervor and political solidarity (Jiang, 2018). Following China's reform and opening-up policy implementation in the late 1970s, these politically oriented dance forms gradually evolved into more recreational practices as the government promoted "radio calisthenics" and "national fitness" programs (Liu, 2015). By the 1990s, with increased exposure to international dance forms and music, these exercises began incorporating elements from aerobics, ballroom dancing, and traditional folk dances, eventually coalescing into what is now recognized as modern square dancing (Wang, 2019).

The unprecedented growth of square dancing coincides with China's rapid urbanization, aging demographic transition, and changing family structures. Statistics indicate that China's elderly population (aged 60 and above) reached 267 million in 2023, constituting approximately 19.8% of the total population—a figure projected to exceed 300 million by 2030 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Against this demographic backdrop, traditional family support systems have been strained by the one-child policy's long-term effects, rural-to-urban migration patterns, and evolving filial values among younger generations (Zhang & Goza, 2018).

*Research Gap and Objectives*

While existing scholarship has extensively examined square dancing from the perspective of older participants (Li, 2020; Chen, 2021), healthcare benefits (Wu & Wong, 2018), and public space contestation (Liu, 2017; Sun, 2022), limited attention has been given to how contemporary youth perceive and respond to this predominantly older-generation cultural practice. This represents a significant research gap, as intergenerational perspectives are crucial for understanding cultural transmissions, social cohesion, and potential conflicts in rapidly transforming societies.

The present study addresses this gap by examining Chinese square dancing through the lens of youth perception. Specifically, this research aims to:

1. Analyze contemporary young people's attitudes, perceptions, and responses toward square dancing and its participants;
2. Identify the underlying sociocultural, psychological, and spatial factors that influence youth perspectives on square dancing;
3. Examine how the phenomenon reflects broader intergenerational relationships and cultural negotiations in contemporary urban China;
4. Propose constructive approaches for fostering intergenerational understanding and cultural innovation around square dancing.

*Literature Review*

The scholarly discourse surrounding square dancing has evolved along several distinct yet interconnected trajectories. From a sociological perspective, researchers have positioned square dancing as a manifestation of China's demographic transition and urbanization processes. Zhang (2018) argues that square dancing functions as a crucial mechanism for social reintegration among older adults marginalized by rapid urbanization, providing both physical activity and social networks. Similarly, Li (2020) characterizes square dancing as an "urban vernacular practice" that enables elderly migrants to establish community connections and cultural belonging within unfamiliar urban environments.

Within cultural studies, scholars have examined the hybrid nature of square dancing aesthetics. Wang (2019) analyzes how square dancing incorporates elements from traditional folk performances, revolutionary mass dances, contemporary pop culture, and global dance trends—creating a uniquely Chinese cultural bricolage that reflects both continuity and transformation. Chen (2021) further identifies how these aesthetic elements become sites of intergenerational negotiation and conflict, as younger generations often perceive square dancing music and choreography as aesthetically unsophisticated or culturally embarrassing.

The public health literature has highlighted square dancing's contributions to elderly wellbeing. Wu and Wong's (2018) longitudinal study of 1,200 square dancing participants across six Chinese cities found significant improvements in cardiovascular health, cognitive function, and psychological wellbeing compared to non-participating control groups. However, these health benefits have been counterbalanced by public space contestation issues explored by researchers like Liu (2017), who documents the rising conflicts between square dancers and other urban residents over noise pollution, space occupation, and competing recreational needs.

While these research streams have substantially contributed to understanding square dancing as a sociocultural phenomenon, they have predominantly focused on elderly participants' experiences or the administrative challenges of managing public space conflicts. With few exceptions (e.g., Tang, 2020), the perspectives of young people—particularly their attitudes, evaluations, and responses to square dancing—remain underexplored in the existing literature.

1. **Research Methodology**
2. Research Approach
3. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using in-depth interviews and discourse analysis to examine young people's attitudes toward square dancing. A qualitative framework allows for a deeper exploration of subjective experiences and perceptions, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies.
4. Data Collection
In-depth Interviews: Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with young urban residents (aged 18–35) across multiple Chinese cities. Participants were selected based on their exposure to square dancing in their daily lives.
5. Media Discourse Analysis: News articles, social media discussions, and online forums were analyzed to assess how square dancing is framed in public discourse and how these portrayals influence youth perceptions.
6. Data Analysis
Thematic Analysis: Interview data were transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes in young people's attitudes toward square dancing.
Discourse Analysis: Media narratives were examined to evaluate how representations of square dancing shape generational perceptions.

**Description of the Study Area:**
*I. The Origin and Development of Square Dancing*

*A. Historical Origins of Square Dancing*
The origins of square dancing in China can be traced back to the fusion of traditional folk dances and collective fitness movements. Historically, various regions in China have had their own forms of group dancing, such as the *Yangge dance* in Shaanxi, the *Da Tiao* (Jumping Dance) in Yunnan, and the *Baishou dance* in Sichuan. These folk dances were often performed during festivals, temple fairs, or rural gatherings, serving as an essential medium for social interaction.
*B.* In the mid-20th century, following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government actively promoted mass cultural and artistic activities to foster collective consciousness and social cohesion. During the 1950s to 1970s, public fitness activities such as *broadcast gymnastics, workplace exercises, and collective dances* became widespread in factories, schools, and government institutions. These activities not only promoted physical fitness but also carried ideological significance. For example, the "Loyalty Dance" during the Cultural Revolution emphasized collective unity and indirectly influenced later group dance formations, including square dancing.
*C. Government-Led National Fitness Campaigns (1980s–1990s)*

The modern form of square dancing began to take shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coinciding with China's transition toward a market economy and increasing government attention to public health. In 1995, the *General Administration of Sport of China* introduced the *National Fitness Program Outline*, which encouraged citizens to engage in low-cost, widely accessible fitness activities. Influenced by Western aerobic exercises and dance workouts, some fitness-oriented dance routines began to appear in urban public spaces.

Several key factors contributed to the early development of square dancing:

1. Media Influence–Television programs such as *Morning Fitness Exercises* popularized fitness dance routines, making them widely accessible to urban residents.

2. Government Initiatives–Local governments and community organizations organized dance competitions and public fitness campaigns to promote square dancing. For instance, in 1998, the *Beijing Municipal Government* launched the "Community Health Project", further encouraging public participation in fitness-oriented dance activities.

3. Urbanization and Social Change –The acceleration of urbanization led to the migration of rural populations to cities, where public spaces became new sites for social interaction, fostering the spread of group dance activities.

*D.* During this period, square dancing was still primarily seen as a form of fitness exercise rather than a fully developed cultural phenomenon. However, the foundational elements were established: the use of public spaces, the emphasis on collective participation, and the incorporation of music-driven movement routines.

### E. The Rise and Cultural Transformation of Square Dancing (2000s–Present)

Since the early 2000s, square dancing has evolved into a widespread cultural phenomenon, driven by multiple social and technological factors:

1. The Influence of Social Media and Digital Platforms

In the late 2000s, video-sharing platforms such as Youku and Tudou facilitated the spread of square dance tutorials, leading to the standardization and mass dissemination of dance routines. In the 2010s, social media applications like WeChat, Douyin (TikTok), and Kuaishou enabled square dancing groups to share performances and exchange ideas, extending the practice from physical spaces to digital communities.

2. Diversification of Musical Styles

Early square dancing was primarily accompanied by fitness music such as *The Health Song*. In the 2010s, square dancing incorporated a broader range of musical genres, including folk, electronic, and pop music. Songs like *The Most Dazzling Ethnic Style* by *Phoenix Legend* became iconic within square dance culture.

3. Government Policies: Support and Regulation

*F.* In 2015, the *General Administration of Sport of China* introduced the "12 Official Square Dance Routines", aiming to standardize and regulate square dance practices nationwide. However, the expansion of square dancing also led to conflicts over noise pollution and public space usage, prompting local governments to introduce time and volume restrictions  in urban areas.

### G.  The Modern Characteristics of Square Dancing

Today, square dancing is more than just a fitness activity; it has transformed into a dynamic cultural and social phenomenon, characterized by the following features:

Intergenerational Adaptation– While predominantly practiced by middle-aged and elderly individuals, some younger participants have begun to engage in square dancing, fostering  intergenerational cultural exchange.

Cross-Cultural Influence– Square dancing has integrated elements from Korean, Japanese, and Western dance styles, reflecting the impact of globalization on Chinese popular culture.

Digitalization and Commercialization– Some square dance groups have gained millions of followers online, with influencers monetizing their dance content through live streaming, sponsorships, and merchandise sales, leading to the emergence of the "viral square dance" phenomenon.

In conclusion, the development of square dancing mirrors China's social transformation, from a planned economy to a market-driven society, from traditional community interactions to digital socialization, and from localized folk traditions to a globalized cultural exchange. Once a state-promoted fitness initiative, square dancing has now become an integral part of urban public life and a key site for observing generational relationships and socio-cultural evolution in modern China.


### II. Youth Perspectives on Square Dancing

1. Recognition of Social Benefits

Young respondents widely acknowledged square dancing's social benefits for older participants. A 24-year-old female graduate student explained:

"I understand why my mother enjoys square dancing. After retirement, her social circle shrank dramatically. Square dancing gives her both exercise and friendship. Sometimes I'm grateful it exists, even though the music drives me crazy."

This sentiment was echoed across interviews, with 83% of respondents recognizing square dancing's role in addressing social isolation among elderly people, particularly those who migrated to cities following their adult children.

2. Aesthetic Distancing

Despite recognizing social benefits, many young respondents expressed strong aesthetic objections to square dancing. Criticisms focused primarily on music selection, dance choreography, and fashion choices, which were frequently described using terms like "outdated," "unsophisticated," or "embarrassing." A 27-year-old male tech worker commented:

"The music they use is objectively terrible—overly simplistic melodies, repetitive lyrics, and this strange hybrid of folk elements with cheap electronic beats. As someone who studied music, I find it physically painful to listen to."

This aesthetic distancing appears connected to broader generational identity formation, as young people define their cultural tastes partly in opposition to those of older generations.

3. Spatial Contestation

The most pronounced source of conflict centered on competing claims to public space. Young people frequently described feeling "pushed out" of parks, squares, and other urban recreational areas by large dance groups. A 19-year-old university student remarked:

"The dancers act like they own the entire park. I once tried to read on a bench near them, and they kept expanding their territory until I was essentially surrounded. The message was clear: this is their space, not mine."

These spatial tensions reflect broader urban challenges in Chinese cities, where rapid urbanization has created high population density without corresponding increases in public recreational space.

4. Noise Pollution Concerns

Excessive volume was consistently cited as the most concrete grievance, particularly among young people living or studying near popular dance locations. Survey data indicated that 87% of respondents who lived within 500 meters of regular square dancing locations reported negative attitudes toward the practice, compared to 19% of those living further away. A 22-year-old respondent described their experience:

"During university exam periods, I couldn't study in my dormitory because five different dance groups would set up outside, each with their own blaring speakers. They continued until 10 PM, completely disregarding student needs."

These concerns have occasionally escalated into direct confrontation, with several respondents describing instances where they or their peers had approached dancers to request volume reduction — interactions that typically resulted in intergenerational tension rather than resolution.

Square dance is a group dance activity that is widely popular in China, not only loved and participated by many middle-aged and elderly people, but also attracting the attention and reaction of many young people. However, young peoples attitudes towards square dancing are not consistent, some young people express understanding and support, while some young people show dissatisfaction and resistance.

According to relevant articles and data, the attitude of contemporary Chinese young people towards square dancing shows a trend of diversification. For example, An Analysis of College Students' Cognition of Square Dancing in Popular Culture, How do young people view square dancing? and What do you think of square dancing? are articles based on survey questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and data collection and analysis, respectively, which analyzed the cognitive level, attitude tendency, and other issues of the young people group towards square dancing. The results consistently showed both positive and rational aspects, as well as negative and emotional tendencies.

In addition, based on my personal experience, the attitude of contemporary young people towards square dancing is complex, because among these square dancers there are likely to be their parents, relatives, etc. On the one hand, they hope that their elders can participate in more activities that are beneficial to their health, increase communication and interaction with the outside world so as not to be lonely, and reduce the pressure they feel because they cannot accompany them for a long time due to work, life, and other reasons. On the other hand, young people tend to have a biased attitude towards square dancing. This can be proved by the emergence of the term "square dance auntie", because in our cultural context, this term contains some derogatory elements to some extent. It implies "old age", "old lady", "rustic", etc. I think, besides the negative impact accidents already discussed above, there are some other more complex special reasons for young people to have such prejudices.

### III. The underlying causes behind the social phenomenon of square dancing

Analysis of the data revealed several underlying factors influencing youth perceptions of square dancing:

1. Social Structural Factors

China's demographic transition toward an aging society has created unprecedented intergenerational challenges. With the 4-2-1 family structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child) becoming increasingly common, younger generations experience heightened pressure to support and accommodate elderly needs. Square dancing represents both a solution to elderly social needs and an additional demand on shared resources that young people perceive as already limited.

2. Cultural Aesthetic Divides

The aesthetic preferences exhibited in square dancing—particularly regarding music selection, dance styles, and public performance — reflect cultural formations specific to China's transitional generations. Many current square dancers experienced their formative years during the Cultural Revolution, when collective performance was politicized and aesthetic experimentation restricted. Contemporary youth, conversely, developed their aesthetic sensibilities in an era of global cultural flows, internet access, and greater individualism. This creates fundamental differences in aesthetic valuation that extend beyond mere taste preferences to encompass divergent conceptualizations of cultural expression itself.

3. Media Representation and Stereotyping

Content analysis of social media platforms revealed widespread stereotyping of square dancers as "大妈" (dama, or "middle-aged aunties"), often portrayed as uncultured, spatially aggressive, and technologically inept. These representations have solidified into cultural stereotypes that shape youth expectations and interpretations of square dancing encounters before they occur. As one 25-year-old respondent noted:

"Before I ever interacted with square dancers, I had already formed a negative impression from all the viral videos showing conflicts between dancers and residents. These stereotypes definitely colored my perception."

This media framing represents a significant factor in constructing youth attitudes toward square dancing as a sociocultural phenomenon.

In summary, the underlying causes behind the social phenomenon of "square dancing" can be analyzed from multiple perspectives such as social structure, social psychology and social change. It is not only a realistic reflection of the aging and urbanization of Chinese society but also a cultural embodiment of Chinese people's collectivism and harmony concept. It is also a dynamic process of diversification and innovation of Chinese society. It is a social cultural phenomenon with Chinese characteristics as well as a cultural soft power with world influence.

## IV. Discussion: Toward Intergenerational Understanding and Cultural Innovation

1. The findings of this study reveal that youth perspectives on square dancing are neither uniformly negative nor consistently positive, but rather reflect complex negotiations of generational identity, aesthetic values, and spatial rights. These negotiations occur against the backdrop of China's rapid social transformation, which has created unprecedented challenges for intergenerational communication and understanding.

2. Bridging the Generational Divide

The research suggests several potential pathways for improving intergenerational relationships around square dancing:

1) Spatial Negotiation and Regulatory Frameworks

Urban planning initiatives that explicitly incorporate dedicated dance spaces could significantly reduce spatial conflicts. Cities like Chengdu and Hangzhou have successfully implemented "dance parks" with specialized sound systems, scheduled usage times, and acoustic barriers that minimize noise pollution while preserving the social benefits of square dancing. These regulatory frameworks represent promising approaches to balancing competing needs within limited urban spaces.

2) Cultural Innovation and Cross-Generational Collaboration

The aesthetic divide between generations presents opportunities for creative collaboration and cultural innovation. As a young music practitioner, the researcher identifies potential for combining traditional elements with contemporary sensibilities through:

- Collaborative music production that fuses traditional instruments with modern production techniques
- Intergenerational dance workshops where choreography draws from both traditional and contemporary movement vocabularies
- Community events explicitly designed to showcase both older and younger performers in dialogue rather than isolation

3) These approaches could transform square dancing from a site of generational conflict to an opportunity for cultural exchange and innovation.

4) Media Representation and Discourse Transformation

Shifting media narratives away from stereotyping and conflict framing toward more nuanced portrayals of square dancing could significantly influence youth perceptions. Documentary projects, social media campaigns, and journalistic coverage that humanize square dancers and contextualize their motivations would contribute to more thoughtful public discourse around intergenerational relationships in contemporary China.

1. "Square dancing is not a very elegant and refined art form", I believe that there must be a large number of young people who think so, which may be caused by the aesthetic difference between the two generations. As a young music worker, we can make our own contribution to the development of square dancing by using the close connection between square dance and music to participate in the creation of square dancing music, to make square dancing more "refined",to make it loved and accepted by young people, thereby eliminating the aesthetic prejudice and gap between people of different ages, and make square dancing truly become an art form that everyone likes and enjoys. I think it is a good opportunity to reflect our values by making our own contribution to social development. The following methods can be tried:

3. Create some music that combines traditional and modern elements, such as playing popular songs with ethnic instruments, or arranging classical songs with electronic music. This can both retain the folk characteristics of square dancing and increase the fashion sense and charm of square dancing. For example, I can play "Waiting for a Thousand Years" with erhu and electric guitar, or play "The Blue Danube" with electronic drums and piano.

4. Design some dance movements that match the music rhythm and style, such as using hip-hop or street dance elements to dance square dancing, or using ballet or modern dance elements to dance square dancing. This can both improve the artistic level of square dancing and exercise the physical coordination and flexibility of square dancers. For example, I can use hip-hop gestures and steps to dance "Little Apple", or use ballet turns and jumps to dance "The Moon Represents My Heart".

Organize some cross-age and cross-cultural square dancing activities, such as inviting young people and old people to dance square dancing together, or inviting people from different countries and regions to dance square dance together. This can both enhance the exchange and interaction of square dancing and expand the vision and influence of square dancing. For example, we can invite our parents and friends to dance "The Most Dazzling Ethnic Style", or invite our foreign friends to dance "Gangnam Style" etc.

As we know, nothing in this world is perfect, so square dancing is the same, and what we can do is to try our best to constantly improve it and make it continue to develop in a better direction. Therefore, as young people today, we should treat square dancing with a more rational and inclusive attitude.

## V. Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to broader theoretical understandings of intergenerational relationships in rapidly transforming societies. The findings suggest that cultural practices like square dancing function as sites where abstract social transitions (urbanization, population aging, changing family structures) become concretely experienced and negotiated. These negotiations are not merely about specific practices but represent broader contestations over cultural authority, public space ownership, and generational identity in contemporary China.

The study also extends Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital by illuminating how generational distinctions in taste and aesthetic preference operate in non-Western contexts undergoing rapid social change. While Bourdieu emphasized class-based distinctions, this research demonstrates how generational cohort experiences—particularly within China's unique historical trajectory from the Cultural Revolution through market reforms to digital connectivity—shape distinctive cultural dispositions that manifest in evaluations of practices like square dancing.

## VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the phenomenon of square dancing in China from the perspective of contemporary young people, who often have negative attitudes and opinions towards it. I have analyzed the causes and consequences of this generational conflict, as well as the potential benefits and challenges of square dancing for both the older and younger generations.

The research question that guided this paper was: How do contemporary young people in China perceive and respond to square dancing, and what are the implications for their relationship and interaction with square dancers? Based on the evidence and analysis presented in the paper, I have argued that contemporary young people in China tend to view square dancing as a nuisance, a disturbance, and a sign of backwardness, and they often resort to criticism, mockery, or confrontation to express their dissatisfaction and resentment. However, I have also suggested that square dancing can be seen as a valuable and meaningful activity that provides physical, mental, social, and cultural benefits for square dancers, as well as an opportunity for intergenerational communication, understanding, and cooperation.

Studying square dancing as a social phenomenon that affects both the older and younger generations in China is important and significant for several reasons. First, it can help us gain a deeper insight into the changing values, lifestyles, and identities of different age groups in contemporary Chinese society. Second, it can help us identify and address the sources and effects of generational conflict and tension that may undermine social harmony and stability. Third, it can help us explore and promote new ways of enhancing generational solidarity and integration that may foster social development and progress.

Based on the findings and arguments of this paper, I would like to provide some suggestions and recommendations for improving the relationship and interaction between young people and square dancers in China. These include:

Promoting dialogue and negotiation between young people and square dancers to resolve disputes and conflicts over public space, noise pollution, music preferences, etc. Educating young people and square dancers about each others perspectives, needs, rights, and responsibilities to increase mutual respect, tolerance, and empathy. Regulating square dancing activities by establishing rules, standards, codes of conduct, etc. to ensure safety, orderliness, legality, etc.

Encouraging cooperation and collaboration between young people and square dancers to create new forms of square dancing that combine traditional and modern elements, as well as to organize cross-age and cross-cultural square dance events that enhance exchange and interaction. Square dancing is a product of China's "harmony culture", reflecting the life wisdom and spiritual demeanor of the Chinese people, and also one of China's cultural contributions to the world.

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