

► Dance therapy under growth in China

# Dance the blues away

By Jiang Wanjuan

**D**ance can bring people together, relax them and build confidence – and, for some, it can also heal.

Dance therapy, the psychological use of body movements to manage emotion, has arrived in China, thanks in part to Dr Zhou Yu, who picked up the habit when studying in Europe.

Dr Zhou established Beijing-based NPO Inspirees International, which has just begun its first three-year program to train a batch of 15 students from China, Singapore and Mexico, as dance therapists.

## Communication therapy

Joan Wittig, a member of the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) and program director of a movement-therapy training institute in the US, was invited to Beijing last week to give the first week of training.

In dance therapy, movements serve as communication instead of language; swinging, jumping, bending and mostly random and spontaneous movements are encouraged to express feelings.

“Dance therapy is the use of dance and movement... You need to be controllable in your own body and ... have a wide range of movement,” Wittig told the *Global Times*.

In the past 20 years, Wittig has faced patients' eating disorders, anxiety and depression at psychiatric hospitals and her own practice in New York.

“Most people I work with have dissatisfaction in their lives and they came to therapy because they want to know more about themselves and live a more satisfying life,” she said. “Psychiatric patients [are] so isolated in the world...

through dance therapy, they will figure out how to create relationships with other people.”

## Credentials

To become a licensed dance therapist in most Western countries, one needs a graduate program. Dance therapy is offered in six universities in the US but is not available in China or the rest of Asia.

As a pioneer, Zhou has agreed with members to follow the entire curriculum of the ADTA over the following three years, a big commitment, especially for those who must fly back and forth every three months for a week's training in Beijing.

“I learnt a bit of dance therapy before, but there is no systematic program, so I came here,” 57-year-old counselor Tang Hoe, who works at a children's health center in Singapore, said. “I hope that I can combine dance therapy with counseling after training.”

Like Hoe, many students in the class have a background in psychology, counseling or medicine, and have already made contact with people who have psychological issues.

“Dance therapy is based on the same analytical theory of other kinds of therapy, so one cannot work as a dance therapist without a back-

ground of physiology, counseling and theoretical approach,” Wittig explained.

As one of the few, probably only, progressive training programs of its kind in China, Zhou's team are trying to set up a systematic education here, although there are credential issues.

“We are not entirely clear about exactly what the credentialing process is going to be here. It's possible that people will apply for credentials from the ADTA, or maybe a system will be established here somehow,” said Wittig. “But only through completing the entire training.”

That is why the program does not currently accept people who just drop in for few courses and think they can “do” dance therapy.

“It is a very systematic and progressive education over

the course of three years,” said organizer Zhou. “Given by licensed, professional dance therapists at an international level.”

“After completing the course, a lot of them may continue their current job but will add dance therapy to the work they are already doing, as counsellors or physiologists,” said Wittig. Besides the professional

course, Zhou provides non-

professional experiences.

Last week, for example, Wittig and the trainees offered two stress management workshops for Ericsson employees, and also met with teachers of young children about non-verbal communication and how that can support their teaching.

“We are setting more programs for personal learning,” said Zhou. “And hopefully we can create a profession in China in the future.”

“What's interesting is that we are dealing with cultural differences” said Wittig. “In the West, one of the things that keeps coming up is questions about expressing feelings, because we tend to communicate very directly. But here, the students tend to talk about how they are going to do things *together*.”

## From dance to therapy

Before Wittig decided to be a dance therapist, she was an unhappy biology major. Although aware of dance therapy and a lover of dance since a child, she never thought of turning it into something bigger until she attended a dance class.

“I was happy during the class and the rest of the day, and even the next day. So I said to myself, if one dance class can make such a difference, then their must be something about this dance therapy.”

Interesting enough, Zhou had a similar experience when also a biology major, doing postgraduate study in the Netherlands.

As the son of a father with senile dementia, Zho understands the effects of mental problems; he began Inspirees International with a Dutch friend and father of an autistic child. So far, the program has had workshops in Chengdu and Beijing, and hopes to extend its courses to Hong Kong soon.

28-year-old Li Jing, a college dance teacher, picked the Inspirees course because it was something she had been looking for, after she happened to direct a play which involved dance, to help students reduce stress.

“Nowadays, college students have many physiological problems,” she said. “I always wanted to learn dance therapy and use it in my teaching, and finally there is [a class].”



Tang Hoe dances. Inset: Joan Wittig teaches during the workshop.

Photos: Guo Yingguang