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ARTS & LIFE

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China's

Burgeoning Pole Dancing Scene

Can Pole Dancing Overcome Adversity and Cement Itself In Chinese Culture?

By Lars James Hamer

As I hung upside down, all I could feel was blood rushing towards my head and I couldn't see anything except the studio lights shining above me. With my right knee hooked tightly against the pole for grip, my instructor Vicky Qiu urged me to stop gripping the pole with my hands. When I eventually mustered the courage to let go, my legs gave up and I slid down the pole, hitting my head on the hard floor below.

It wasn't only my head that took a beating that day. The next day, the muscles in my abdomen and arms were sore and it hurt to move. My body was telling me that pole dancing is more intense than I had imagined.

I never expected I would take a pole dancing class. Yet, in major cities across China, 'pole' is becoming an increasingly popular pastime for both locals and expats. Qiu began her pole dancing journey almost by accident, but since then her passion for the sport has grown day by day. After our class, Qiu and I discussed her pole dancing career, touched upon the stigma that surrounds the sport and how

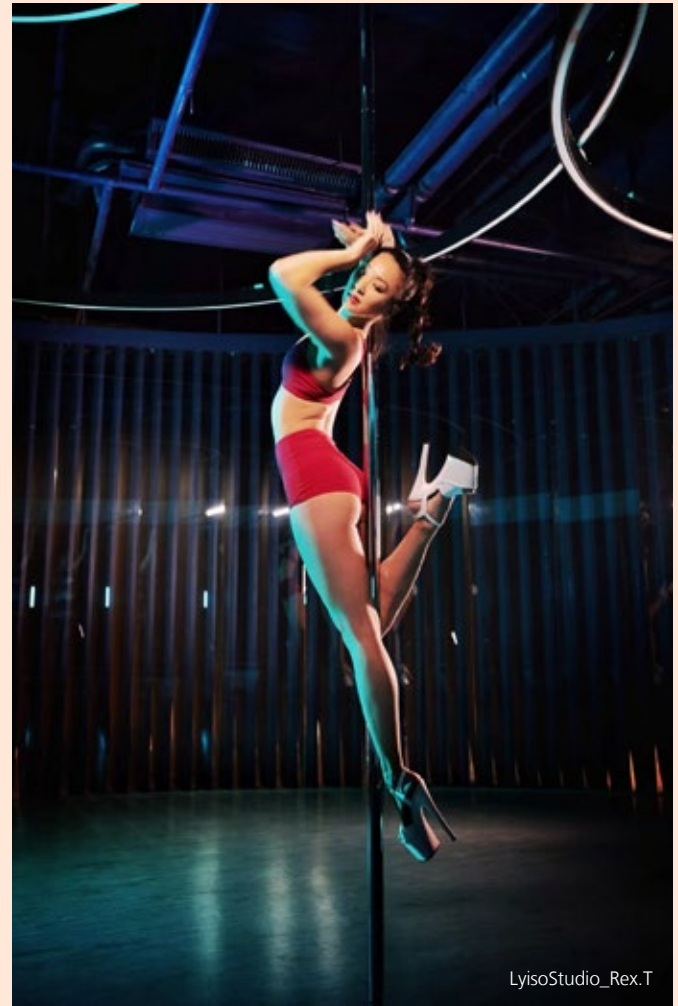
pole can empower.

"My friend started teaching pole in 2017 when we were both in Sydney and she asked me if I wanted to join, but I didn't go because the studio was too far away for me." Qiu, who was born in Guangzhou, but lived in Australia for a decade from the age of 15.

"My friend loved pole so much that she actually put a pole in her room." Even after a day teaching and spinning, Qiu's passion for the sport resonates as she explains how her journey began. "One day I went over to her house and she started teaching me some stuff. I thought it was fun and, to be honest, I felt like I was pretty good at it."

After a couple of practice sessions in her friend's home, Qiu was hooked. Although she moved back to Guangzhou only a couple of months later, Qiu was determined that she would continue her pole dancing journey in her hometown.

"I graduated with a degree in economics from Macquarie University. When I first came back to Guangzhou, I wanted to get a job in a bank or something like that. I tried office jobs,



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but it's just not for me. All I could think about was pole and learning new tricks."

We've all thought about quitting our job and throwing the rest of our life at a favorite hobby, but hardly any of us actually do it. But Qiu did and, when she returned to Guangzhou, she found several studios where she could pursue that dream.

After months of practice Qiu quickly became more than proficient in the basics and needed a challenge. Twenty-four years old at the time, she found a school on Guangzhou's Beijing Road that offered courses to become a qualified pole dancing instructor. Undeterred by its grueling six-days-a-week intensive schedule, after

four months of hard training she became a qualified pole dancing teacher.

"I was there every day, and in terms of flexibility and strength they push you really hard. We would just sit in a split for a couple of minutes and hold it, it's really painful! You have to do that every day. There's a whole hour of flexibility, and then an hour of strength training before you can even start with tricks."

Qiu's classes and her pole dancing style are heavily influenced by what she learnt on Beijing Road. She mainly focuses on aerial moves that require core strength and flexibility. Although good core strength and flexibility are vital for pole dancing, Qiu is quick to warn that you don't

need to have these skills before you start.

"A lot of people think they're not strong or flexible enough. At the beginning no one is, but they will get stronger and more flexible during the training. Anyone can do it but if you don't start, you will never be strong and flexible."

When I asked Qiu what she would say to those who aren't sure about whether or not they should try pole dancing, she came back with a line to match her Nike leggings, "just do it. For me I feel like it has given me a lot of confidence."

Despite becoming a qualified pole dancing instructor in 2017, it wasn't until 2021 that Qiu began managing her own pole dancing studio, Fit Well Pilates Studio in Guangzhou's Tianhe District. Never one to be tied down to one place, in 2018 Qiu was off on her travels again. "I decided to do a masters degree in Business Administration at Bangkok University."

As Qiu recounts the 18 months she spent studying in Thailand, she lets out



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a nervous laugh and her Aussie-tinged English is revealed. "It wasn't very useful. It was kind of just an excuse for me to go somewhere." That said, it would be hard to argue that she didn't learn some skills in Bangkok that enabled her to successfully run a pole dancing studio in Guangzhou; the most important pole dancing skills are learnt in the studio.

"I found a pole dancing studio in Bangkok and I was going there twice a week. The classes in Thailand were better for me at the time. Each instructor has their own style, and something they're good at. Obviously, if you go into a school, they will train you much harder. But an instructor will focus on more specific areas and styles. In Bangkok I was able to focus more on the aerial style."

Qiu kept moving after she graduated, this time to Europe where she was coached by Austria's 2017 Miss Pole Dance champion, Mina Siehs. "I was living in Innsbruck, Austria, and dancing in a studio called Poledance Playground. I loved Mina because of her variety of styles."

It was in Mina's Poledance Playground that Qiu was inspired to return to her hometown to start her own pole dancing studio. She strives for her pole dancing studio to be one where both men and women from all ages, backgrounds and professions can come together and share a common interest.

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Having obtained pole dancing skills from all over the world, and being fluent in English, Chinese and Cantonese, Qiu's pole dancing classes cater to both Chinese nationals and foreigners of varying abilities. Despite studios trying to promote the benefits, there is still a stigma attached to the sport by those who don't fully understand it.

"When I tell some guys I'm a pole dancer, they say, 'Oh, you're a stripper?' I don't get offended, they just don't understand that pole dancing doesn't have to be linked to stripping. I think a lot of people still don't understand pole dancing and it's still very niche. But if you look at Shanghai, it's more international than Guangzhou and there are a lot of good studios there."

"In more traditional Chinese cities, there is still a reluctance from people to try something like pole dancing. Perhaps because of misconceived negative connotations or they are scared of what others will think of them."

It's from here that the biggest business challenge for Qiu arises: finding people who have a similar mindset. Those who want to challenge themselves, be inspired and aren't afraid of going against cultural norms. However, no matter what others think, the benefits of pole will always outweigh the negatives.

"It's a full body exercise, it will help you improve your posture and you'll get really – like really – toned. After I started pole dancing I noticed my shoulders were opening

"I don't get offended, they just don't understand that pole dancing doesn't have to be linked to stripping."

up as I walked and I was getting stronger and stronger."

Classes at Fit Well Pilates pole dancing studio start with a quick warm up, followed by flexibility and strength training before moving on to pole work. Qiu's classes are different from other studios' in Guangzhou because even her group classes are tailored to the individual.

"I don't push my students too hard. For example, flexibility is really hard and you can't just do the splits after one day. It's just not possible. If I see some students are at quite a high level, I'll teach them some more difficult tricks, while beginners can focus on the basics. Ultimately, I just want them to come here, have fun and relieve stress after work."

All of the courses at Fit Well come with three one-hour practice classes, where students can use the studio for free to practice.

"When I started in Bangkok, I wanted to practice all the time but I could only rent the whole studio and it was crazy expensive. I want my students to be able to

practice on their time."

In 2022, Qiu will enter Airstar, a national pole dancing competition in Chengdu. The winner will go on to compete at an international level competition.

Pole dancing has often been stained with misconceptions, but we should look at the benefits it brings like improved confidence, strength and flexibility. "Remember, it's never too late to start. If I could go back four years, I would go to my friends studio in Sydney every day. The only regret I have is not starting sooner. I hope more people can embrace pole dancing the way it embraced me."