

CROSSING HISTORIES: DANCE, BODY, AND CULTURE

Jingxian Chen

May 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Sarah Lawrence College

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the cross-cultural dancing body: the interrelationship between body and dance forms, as well as the body and culture. The first section will discuss the relationship between the body and culture in dance. The second section will describe my process of making the cross-cultural dance in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so appreciative to work with my professor Peggy Gould in the thesis process, I feel so much support in academic research and personal emotion. Thank you for giving me a useful guide and leading me in a worthwhile way. As well as all of the advisors in the TBA class, John Jasperse, Beth Gill, Dean Moss, and Yanira Castro, I thank them for helping me to finish my final thesis project and explore new perspectives as a choreographer, continuing to ask me questions and guiding me to think about the reasons for making decisions.

Also, I want to thank my cohort for helping me during these two years of studying. Not only in the study section, but also in the real life. They let me feel so much support in studying abroad. Especially, I thank Chloe A. Schafer, who has helped me a lot in the writing process. So many thanks to all of my dancers, Sofia Cipriano, Rye Zhu, Elena Martinez, Dahlia Sheperd, and Mingjun Han, who collaborated perfectly with me on the final thesis project. I learned a lot from them during the whole process.

I also would like to thank the library staff, especially Diana Wallerstein for writing center instruction and for helping me. In the end, I would like to thank my family and partner, who always supported me in the learning process.

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Figure 1 “Untitled”, photo by Liu Hai Dong(刘海栋). Class of 2015 students at Minzu University of China(中央民族大学) wearing traditional Tibetan customs with long sleeves show the Tibetan dance. https://www.sohu.com/a/279875262_482903 Accessed on 21 April 2023.
2. Figure 2 “Untitled”, photo by Liu Hai Dong(刘海栋). Class of 2015 students at Minzu University of China(中央民族大学) dressed in traditional Uyghur red and black costumes demonstrate Uyghur folk dances. https://www.sohu.com/a/279875262_482903 Accessed on 21 April 2023.
3. Figure 3 “Untitled”, photo by Liu Hai Dong(刘海栋). Class of 2015 students at Minzu University of China(中央民族大学) dressed in traditional Dai costumes demonstrate Dai folk dances. https://www.sohu.com/a/279875262_482903 Accessed on 21 April 2023.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 Literature review.....	4
Chapter 2 Boxes and Body	10
2.1 Boxes - Dance Forms in My Body	
2.2 The Culture Behind Dance Forms	
Chapter 3 Cross-cultural	17
3.1 Why am I interested in Cross-cultural work?	
3.2 My experience with producing cross-cultural pieces	
Conclusion	24
Bibliography	25

Introduction

This research focuses on the cross-cultural dancing body: the relationship between body and dance forms, as well as the body and culture. The first section discusses the relationship between the body and culture in dance. Linda Caruso Haviland and Bill Bissell propose considering the body as an archive in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. (2018) "The body can produce, absorb, and process knowledge, and is an archive capable of storing such knowledge." (Haviland, p1) This is a conception that I strongly agree with, just as the transmission and acquisition of dance rely on the storage of knowledge in the language of body movement. Inspired by this idea, I discovered different "boxes" in my body. These boxes correspond to the different dance styles that I have studied, including Chinese Classical Dance, Chinese folk dance, contemporary dance, West African dance, and hip-hop.

Various local cultures and people influence the formation of every dance. "Because dance does not exist in a cultural vacuum, but rather is a situated embodied aesthetic practice.... In addition, dance provides a rich set of resources for exploring the 'histories of bodies'."(Thomas, p93) Through my previous research, I have sensed that these dance forms I studied are not separate, but can somehow relate to each other. For example, while I was in a West African dance class, I experienced some moments related to Chinese folk dance. It is not with a specific movement or the shape of a movement, but with the cultural similarities behind the dance. I will describe more deeply about this idea in the second chapter.

I am curious about the relationship between the boxes and my body. How does the body create a connection with the different forms? What is the role of the body in the various dance forms? The relationship between the body and culture is close. I desire to deepen my understanding of different dance forms, and the relationship between dance and the body.

The second section discusses the cross-cultural work of Chinese choreographers in the United States. Beth Gill¹, an artist based in New York City and a faculty member at Sarah Lawrence College(SLC), asked me “Why do you want to make cross-cultural work?” and “Why this is important to you?” These are meaningful questions that I explore and expand upon in this thesis. In Chapter 3—Seven Interviews: Chinese Dance Artists in North America from *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond*(2016), Lily Cai (蔡福丽) describes how she is sometimes asked to give pre-concert talks in order to provide the audience with a few ideas about Chinese dance. She shared, "I usually begin by saying to the audience that 100 percent of the people know about Chinese food, but not many people know about Chinese dance!" (88) As a cross-cultural choreographer, I think it is a perfect starting sentence, and it seemed like a good way to go for the audience, who don't know much about Chinese dance or Chinese culture.

As I mentioned before, I want the audience to enjoy the performance without having to know what Chinese dance is before the concert. Another aim is to keep introducing Chinese dance to a new generation of Chinese Americans and presenting Chinese culture to the West in order to reduce the need to explain the performance before it happens.

In reading the seven interviews, I realized that these Chinese artists have been teaching Chinese dance and presenting Chinese culture for a long time. They had multiple reasons for beginning this difficult work, and they challenge themselves to explore answers that reveal what dance means to them in their creative process. Four of the seven interviewees are from mainland China, and most of them came to North America after the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR) is a very important period in the history of

¹ <https://www.bethgill.com/bethpage>

Chinese art, including dance. These artists were influenced and impacted by the CCR in several ways. For instance, Yin Mei (殷梅) is a Chinese choreographer currently living in New York, as well as a professor and director of the dance program at Queens College. She experienced the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR) before emigrating to the U.S. One question in her interview was “The impulse for your dancing, the intense struggle lies in your experience of the Cultural Revolution and China’s recent past?” Yin Mei stated, “Yes, the experiences I lived through in China. ... My most prominent memories start with the Chinese Cultural Revolution. So anything I do, I don’t really try to portray the era itself, because I don’t feel that I am capable of that. But I can do it through my own experience – my living through, my life basically – what I know is during that era.”² Thus, we can see that CCR has influenced her work and her perspective as an artist in many ways.

After reading this chapter, I become really curious about the younger generation of artists in China. Although the book was published in 2016, these interviewees are all older-generation artists, and all of them came to the United States before 2000. The younger Chinese artists, like those born in China at the end of the 20th century, who have experienced studying in North America and had long training in Chinese dance are creating work based on their current aspirations. I want to know their stories, their reasons for coming, and what they think about this cross-cultural work. Do they have a new perspective on dance? Having not lived through the CCR, I am curious about their cultural perspectives. I also want to gain insight into the difficulties faced by Chinese artists and the difficulties of making cross-cultural work in America. Beyond the huge differences in culture and mentality, how can Chinese artists survive in America?

² *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond*, Shin-Ming Li Chang and Lynn E. Frederiksen, p123

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The article *"The New Face of Chinese Dance"*(2001) describes the initial emergence of the dance form, modern dance, and the reaction of audiences and traditional dance forms in mainland China. Every new form experiences challenges and difficulties. Guangzhou Modern Dance Company (广州现代舞团) is no different. As the first company to introduce contemporary dance in mainland China, it encountered some difficulties, such as the need for dancers with traditional dance training backgrounds to rethink the relationship between the body and dance and how to express themselves in dance, as well as the need to change the audience's expectations to appreciate a whole new body language.

The intense emotional response to reading this article is experienced not only as someone with a traditional dance training background feeling similar difficulties to dancers of Guangzhou Modern Dance Company in the new world of dance but also as a Chinese choreographer eager to reflect Chinese culture to feel supported in the world of contemporary dance.

"What roles can they play? Are they capable of dancing a specific piece?" Gao Chengming, the company's artistic director and general manager, asked. He added that "The spirit of modern dance is to create. We are not interested in imitating Chinese dance. Yes, we reflect Chinese culture but not its technique."

Although contemporary dance has been developing in China for over 30 years, these problems and questions still exist for every dancer who wants to change his or her own statement, this is especially true for those dancers with a traditional background who want to find themselves from a choreographer's perspective.

Gao mentioned, "The spirit of modern dance is to create." It is the main strategy when I learn contemporary dance. Dancers including myself have been told frequently that we should abandon all the standards we learned in Chinese Classical Dance and try to create something

new. I continue to struggle with moving my body in a "contemporary" way. For example, I used to do fluid movements with my breath in contemporary dance combinations. But people would say, "You look like you are still dancing Chinese Classical Dance" and "You should move your body more strongly and clearly." However, after I studied at Sarah Lawrence College, I realized that we cannot abandon the history of living in our bodies, and I started receiving the idea of my previous training. Additionally, I suddenly realized the "new thing" is not a totally new way to move, but an approach to finding my own way to move my body.

Why do I aspire to incorporate Chinese culture into my work? This is an important question to me, especially for me to create work. Because I know some Chinese choreographers are not interested in Chinese culture or don't want to showcase it in their work. I believe it is a personal choice, but I want to dig into the reasons for the different decisions. Getting an idea from *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. (2018) to consider the body as an archive, I realized that part of the reason might be related to my previous training. In chapter 1 of this book, Haviland proposes the dancers' knowledge and memories could become part of dancers' language and thoughts. I think it does affect my choice in some way, but it is not the main reason. After reading this chapter, I also realize that dance study and research about different forms eventually go back to thinking of the body.

As I mentioned in the introduction I was inspired by this idea of considering the body as an archive, and I discovered that I have different "boxes" in my body. These boxes are the equivalent of the other dance forms I have trained in. The formation of every dance is influenced by various local cultures and people. In the Foreword of *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond* (2016). Author, Emily E. Wilcox, points out "In fact, all dances are the products of specific cultural environments and contain meanings and tastes specific to particular cultural

groups. Thus, all dances are cultural.”(p xi). Dance is a form of recording and inheriting history. Every form of dance expresses the cultural meaning of various regions and races. Each dance form is indispensable even if manifested according to various aesthetics and regional differences. The relationship between the body and culture is much closer than I had previously considered.

The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory(2003) By Helen Thomas. The Body in Dance, chapter 4 of this book, describes the body in ballet and contact improvisation, also the technology shifts and aesthetic transformations. It helps me to understand the relationship between body and culture, also the boxes in my body mentioned before.

*Chinese Dance*³ is highly recommended. It details the historic dynasties and dance forms in China and includes interviews with seven Chinese artists living in the United States. It helped me learn more about Chinese artists living in the United States and led me to think about the importance of the development of dance from different cultures in this country. When I began to have the courage to make cross-cultural dance, I was confused and full of uncertainty at first. Was it necessary to share Chinese culture in North America? It wasn't until I read chapter 3: *Seven Interviews: Chinese Dance Artists in North America*. I realized that these artists who had been teaching Chinese dance and introducing Chinese culture for a long time, were all persisting in doing such a thing. Running their own dance companies, teaching Chinese dance, and creating their own works to perform in North America also present many challenges and problems, but they still keep doing it. It encourages me to keep doing it, even though I may need more time to explore, eventually, I will find a way to share my perspectives.

As I mentioned in the introduction, four of the Chinese artists from the mainland of China, came to the Americas after Cultural Revolution. As previously stated, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a very important period in the development of Chinese art. Many

³ *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond* (2016)

people have written about the impact and influence of the Cultural Revolution, both positive and negative. It was also a critical period in the development of dance in China. Before the 1950s, Chinese dance was not an independent art form. Dance scholars reconstructed and innovated historical theatrical forms (Xiqu-戏曲, such as Peking Opera and Kunqu) to define Chinese classical dance; they also combined Han styles and minority styles to define Chinese folk dance.⁴ In 1978, the first professional dance institution, Beijing Dance Academy(北京舞蹈学院), was established with government support. The hard work and persistent exploration and innovation of Chinese dance scholars have provided a solid foundation for the development of Chinese dance today. But looking back, according to four Chinese artists' experiences at that time, also Chinese dance was relatively early in its development and not as rigorous and systematic as it is now. They came to North America and found a way to express themselves as artists in dance. Did it represent more freedom to experiment compared to now? I'm curious if those artists would have had more possibilities to choreograph or teach in the old days. At the same time, I am also curious if choreography or teaching nowadays loses some space for experimentation because of the systematic learning of classification.

When I searched academic databases for Chinese dance, the results returned reviews of *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*(2019) By Emily Wilcox. This book is based on Wilcox's dance study and research in Beijing Dance Academy of China and introduces the development of Chinese dance from the 1930s-the 2010s, including numerous illustrations and audiovisual media resources. She provides a historical overview of the development of Chinese dance by timeline.⁵ For this book, I am mainly interested in chapter 6 – Inheriting the Socialist Legacy: Chinese Dance in the Twenty-First Century. I sensed that looking

⁴ *Revolutionary Bodies*, Emily Wilcox, p2

⁵ Kwan, SanSan. "Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy by Emily Wilcox., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019

at Chinese dance from an outside perspective would give me new perspectives on how to see or understand it better. Also, with a new understanding, would there be new discoveries about the parts of Chinese culture that attracted me to showcase them?

I have to say that Emily Wilcox is a very important researcher of Chinese dance because she opens the door for Western readers and audiences to appreciate Chinese dance. She describes the differences between the East and the West and helps bring attention to the gaps between the two. Her second book, *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*, co-edited with Dr. Katherine Mezur, was published by the University of Michigan Press in 2020. It is also a good resource for people interested in the diversity of East Asia dance, including mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, and so on. Reading this book has helped me figure out what is Chinese Classical Dance (CCD), and the relationship between CCD and me.

*“In addition to the above projects, Dr. Wilcox has published thirty scholarly journal articles and book chapters, in both English and Chinese, in venues such as The Journal of Asian Studies, positions: asia critique, China Perspectives, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Asian Theatre Journal, TDR: the Drama Review, Journal of the Beijing Dance Academy, Journal of the Society for Dance Documentation and History, Wudao pinglun (Dance Review), and numerous edited collections.”*⁶

Before, I had planned to interview some young Chinese dance artists, as I wrote in the introduction. When I started looking, I realized that very few artists in that age group still stay over here. Tingyu Xie⁷ (谢亭玉) as my interviewee, through our conversation that we noticed that it's actually more difficult for Chinese people to stay here as artists. I think it is not only about identity. In fact, local artists are also struggling to make ends meet, they need to find their own funding and have to work several different jobs to support their dreams until they can fully

⁶ <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/eewilcox/>

⁷ Tingyu Xie holds an MFA degree in Contemporary Dance at Case Western Reserve University, and a bachelor's degree in Physics at Southeast University in China.

support their living expenses as an artist. If life is not easy for local artists, the cost of living for international artists is even higher.

Also, the relationship between China and the United States has not been very harmonious in the past few years, and there are fewer opportunities for international artists. Additionally, the concept of Chinese dance is considered a marginal culture here, so probably there will be little funding to support staying. Such a vicious circle leads to some of the younger artists eventually returning to China to develop.

Overall, I am excited about these sources. Not only does it show me some of the thinking and ideas that already exist in this direction, but it also shows some new perspectives for thinking about and understanding this research. I hope I can use this research to inform my understanding of what it means to create cross-cultural work; to find what I believe to be the core of Chinese culture and to show some new perspectives of Chinese artists living in the United States.

Chapter 2 – Boxes and Body

2.1 Boxes - Dance Forms in My Body

The concept of the "boxes" is one that I have mentioned several times. Does the box mean anything other than being the equivalent of every dance form I've ever studied? Why do I prefer to call it a box rather than an archive?

1) Definition of boxes

“Imagining the body as an archive necessitated rethinking the meaning of both ‘body’ and ‘archive’. It requires a radical openness to the possibility that knowledge can be both legible and embodied, that it is not only accessed through texts but also generated and understood through physical states and actions.” (1)Haviland wrote. The body can store knowledge, and people learning from each other is like an archive. I think that's how dance is passed on. For example, Chinese dancers re-established Chinese classical dance in the 20th century because it had been lost for many reasons. But Chinese folk dance relies on people's physical memory to transmit a particular culture, memory, and knowledge.

When I think about considering the body as an archive, I think of the body as a place to absorb knowledge and store it, synthesizing multiple ideas. It is like writing a thesis, many ideas could overlap, connect with, and absorb each other.

The reason that I call them "boxes" instead of archives, is I see them as different worlds of dance. Like worlds that exist inside boxes, there are specific rules and ways of functioning in their own worlds. These dance boxes are separated by thick partitions and tops, making it difficult to be connected, overlapped, and absorbed by each other. I believe that the limitations and barriers between different dance styles have led me to develop those box images in my body. It's hard for me to break down those barriers and I don't know how to translate and incorporate

those styles into my own body language. For example, when I explore improvisation with a specific type of music, I am easily carried into a specific dance form by the music, making it difficult to focus on how to move my body. To some extent, the boundaries of the box affect how I see my body, and how dance forms connect and communicate with each other in my body.

2) Brief Background of “Chinese Ethnic Folk Dance” – “中国民族民间舞”

Before I describe more about my relationship with different styles of dance forms, I would like to provide a general background of Chinese folk culture. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a total of 56 ethnic groups were officially recognized by the government's survey and statistics. Based on The Seventh National Census of China in 2020⁸, the government reported the Han nationality as the largest population in China, accounting for about 91.11% of the total population. The other 55 ethnic groups comprise the remaining 8.99% and are referred to as ethnic minorities. China's vast land, and long history, have produced a rich and unique culture of ethnic minorities and Han Chinese.

Since China is a multi-ethnic country, spreading different ethnic cultures has become a part of Chinese dance. As Chang wrote in Chapter 1 - Folk Dance in *China Dance*: “Folk Dance is also a significant offering in schools and universities. BDA’s folk dance division specializes in Han folk dance as well as several different Minority dances 少数民族民间舞蹈, for example, Tibetan 藏, Uyghur 维, Chaoxian 朝鲜, Mongolian 蒙, Dai 傣, Miao 苗, and Yi 彝.”(49) Han as the biggest population in China, still have different folk dances based on various areas, such as Northeast yangge 东北秧歌, Shandong yangge 山东秧歌, Anhui huagudeng 安徽花鼓灯, etc) Beijing Dance Academy(BDA), with the support and funding of the government, develops into the highest institution for dance education and assessment in China. Many famous and powerful

⁸ <https://baike.baidu.com/item/第七次全国人口普查/23542107?fr=aladdin>

dancers have graduated from this school and also have worked in this school for the development of dance, establishing it as a leading institution in the history of Chinese dance development.

3) Boxes in My Body

I began my dance training at nine years old. I enjoyed dancing because it was such an elegant form of art, and I felt the beauty of my moving body. After elementary school, I decided to pursue dance professionally. For six years I trained rigorously in dance at the Jiangsu Theater Arts School in Nanjing and developed strong techniques in ballet, Chinese classical dance, and Chinese folk dance. After this training, I felt that I wanted to express my artistic voice through dance and decided to choose choreography as my major in college. During four years in college (2015-2019), I not only strengthened my previous dance training but also learned new dance forms such as modern technique, contemporary dance, and choreography.

I have had a strong feeling that I was in different physical states in various dance classes. These states were kept in different boxes and would appear in the appropriate classes. What surprised me was that the corresponding states would rarely appear where they shouldn't. This feeling was strongest in the Chinese folk dance class, where we were required to learn the dances of five ethnic minorities that have very different and distinct styles due to their geographical location, customs, and history. For instance, when learning Tibetan dance, we were asked to relax our spine and knees while dancing. In particular, the water sleeves of Tibetan dance are a very important prop (Figure 1). Learning Uyghur dance requires dancers to have a straight back and a slightly upturned chin (Figure 2). Learning the Dai dance requires a three-step bent body or arm shape. (Figure 3).



Figure 1 “Untitled”

photo by Liu Hai Dong 刘海栋.

Figure 2 “Untitled”

photo by Liu Hai Dong 刘海栋



Figure 3 “Untitled”

photo by Liu Hai Dong 刘海栋

Especially when performing folk dance string pieces, I often have to perform dances of several ethnic groups, requiring me to switch between the characteristic steps or chapters of different ethnic groups within a few minutes. Each dance form is vastly different from the others as far as movement characteristics are concerned. The effect of the box is very important and strong in these experiences. When these dance styles are stored in my body through a period of

training, they are stored in different boxes so that when I need to perform each specific style, the corresponding box will open, and allow me to perform all of the details of that style. That is why I call them boxes rather than archives.

On the other hand, I think the concept of boxes can also limit my imagination about choreography. It forces me to follow the structure of different dance forms. Sometimes in the process of making a piece, it becomes only combined with characteristic poses or steps, rather than thinking deeply about the body or the meaning. I am glad that I am now aware of those boxes in my body and I have begun to think about how to break the boundaries of the boxes.

2.2 The Culture Behind Dance Forms

In the spring of 2022, I took a West African Dance course at Sarah Lawrence College, taught by Lacina Coulibaly. He taught Kuku and Lamban, different styles of West African dance. In this class, I did find it easier to know how to move my body to West African rhythms and to become familiar with the particular relationship between my body and the ground than other students. Lacina would sometimes ask me to do a demonstration and use it as an example to explain the main points of the movement. I believe this is all related to my previous experience with Chinese folk dance for several reasons. For example, I feel that African dance moves very close to the ground, requiring more bending of the legs and relaxation of the upper body in the process, which is different from the upright back of ballet. This is very similar to Tibetan dance in some ways. Historically, the Tibetans were nomadic and agrarian people, living in the mountains and grasslands on the roof of the world. Devout religious beliefs and emotional psychology coupled with heavy daily physical labor and living habits have formed the Tibetan people's bent-backed living posture in their daily lives, which is reflected in dance and further

causes the basic physical characteristics of Tibetan dance of sitting on the hips, bowing the waist, and bending the back, and has developed into a whole set of kinetic style systems.

I have never studied the history of African dance in depth, but only discuss it from my personal learning experience. I observed similar cultures behind the two cultures – West African dance and Chinese folk dance.

First of all, musicians are important to both dance forms. Each nationality has its own unique and strong musical rhythmic and expressive characteristics, so people know which nationality the dance belongs to as soon as they hear the music. It is a powerful feeling. Not only because there is a strong and unique musical expression, but the music and dancers will make the audience feel the unique ethnic culture on a deeper level.

Second, the body movements are relatively similar in trajectory and the overall center of gravity is close to the ground. This requires good coordination in accomplishing movements that seem very easy but actually require a high degree of coordination.

Third, dance has a similar place in the hearts and existence of people in both cultures. Dance is more than what we call "art." Lacina Coulibaly, speaking about what dance is and what it means to him, says that for people living in West Africa, dance is life. There is also a saying in China that 55 out of 56 ethnic groups can sing and dance well(56个民族, 55个能歌善舞), meaning that there are 56 ethnic groups in China and that people from the minorities are better at singing and dancing, even if they don't have any professional training. For them, singing and dancing are part of their lifestyle, just as much a part of life as eating and drinking.

Ci Hai(辞海) defines folk dance in this way: "A traditional dance form that is widely circulated among the people and has a distinctive national style and local characteristics." Modern researchers of folk dance have summarized the concept of folk dance as follows: "The dance form that was created collectively by the working masses in the process of the development of material and spiritual civilization of a nation or region, and was passed on among the masses, and is still in circulation, which has distinctive regional and national characteristics, and expresses both the cultural background of a certain historical period cultural background under economic conditions, but also with the development of social life and the injection of

new components." Today in folklore, people dance folk dances not for the purpose of showing others, but for the people themselves. This is the basic attribute of folk dance and the basic purpose of achieving self-entertainment. People are using folk dance to achieve the enrichment of their lives and their desire for life, and its place and role in people's lives is obvious. Therefore, folk dance has been able to always maintain its unique sense of national life and continues to spread in modern times.⁹

Combining the three points I made, there are plausible connections between these cultures that exist within the dances. I am very curious about the connection between these dance forms, the fruits of dance that grew in different regions, each contributing a part to the heritage of humanity. Folk dance is not performed for royalty; it grows in folklore. Through dance, I observed the similarities between the celebrations of human civilizations, despite the fact that people live so far away from each other. In my experience, emotion and stylistic characteristics are more important than technique in folk dance performances. It is not only performed as a piece but also shows the ethnic culture behind the dance. Audiences can know and understand the local people, culture, customs, and so on, through these dances.

⁹ *Ci Hai(辞海)* is a Chinese language tool, a large comprehensive dictionary that takes words with words and functions as a dictionary, language dictionary, and encyclopedic dictionary.

Chapter 3 – Cross-cultural Works

3.1 Why am I interested in Cross-cultural work?

I remember the first time I came to the United States for the 2019 American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina. That was my first time seeing many dance forms and dancers or dance enthusiasts from different countries in one dance program. I was really excited about it and curious about where Chinese dance was in this festival, a mass gathering of international people. I saw the introduction and pieces of Lin Hwai-min(林怀民) and Shen Wei(沈伟), famous Asian choreographers, in this huge festival. When I saw how many dancers wanted to perform in their pieces, I had a longing inside me to do something like this, not only to let more people know about Chinese culture but also to find my own way of understanding it.

Shen Wei is a dancer, choreographer, painter, and filmmaker. He was born in China's Hunan province in 1968. During his student years, he studied Western visual art, which propelled an interest in modern dance. In 1989, he began modern dance training at the American Dance Festival's (ADF) program at the Guangdong Dance Academy in China. In 1991, at the age of 23, he became a founding member of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, the first such company in China. Upon receipt of a fellowship, he moved to New York City in 1995 to study with the Nikolais/Louis Dance Lab and, in the same year, was invited to create work at the American Dance Festival. In July 2000, he founded Shen Wei Dance Arts (SWDA) and his company quickly entered the international touring circuit.¹⁰

Both Shen Wei(沈伟) and Lin Hwai-Min(林怀民) incorporate Chinese aesthetics into their works. They combined different art forms in their works, such as installation, painting, and media. For example, they both use the dancer's body as a brush. Shen Wei used the dancer's body as a brush to complete a Chinese landscape painting using ink at the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics; while Lin Huaimin's work, Cursive(行草), used the dancer's body to present the process of writing Chinese calligraphy(书法). I think their compositions and choreographic approaches are very successful and I always feel an inexplicable sentiment when I am looking at their works. Both of these artists inspire me to find my own way to express myself.

¹⁰ <https://www.shenweidancearts.org/about-shenwei>

China has historically been deficient in sharing its culture with the outside world. When people think of Asian culture, most people think of Japanese culture or Korean culture: Japan has manga and Korea has K-pop, both of which are prevalent in and across social media platforms. When I came to the United States, I found some cultural appropriation happening. For example, in recent years, there have been a lot of debates on the internet about whether it's Chinese Hanfu or Korean Hanbok, and whether it is Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year. Some people argue: not calling it Chinese New Year is for cultural inclusiveness because there are many people who celebrate New Year, such as Koreans or Vietnamese, so we can't call it Chinese New Year. However, the origin of this holiday is Chinese, as a tradition that has continued for thousands of years. Other Asian countries also celebrate this holiday, because China was very strong and powerful in ancient times, and affected some of the surrounding countries. Also, Chinese New Year is not on the same day every year and requires a special algorithm. It has to be combined with the solar calendar and the Chinese lunar calendar, which is calculated and determined each year by the researchers at the Purple Mountain Observatory of the Chinese Academy of Sciences(中国科学院紫金山天文台) each year before it is released. So, as a country that publishes a specific time of the New Year every year, perhaps it makes sense that the country where the holiday originated exists in the name of this holiday.

China has an internet wall to avoid undesirable events, but it also multiplies the lack of Chinese sharing and participation with the whole world's internet. It causes lots of misunderstandings on the internet. Cross-cultural work can reduce cultural appropriation and misunderstanding through diverse exposure and education.

I realize that new generations coming out of China are aware of the need to have a voice. Especially for me, through years-long study in the United States, I realize that you can be

rejected or denied by others, but you must learn to speak up for yourself. The first generation of Chinese immigrants was actually taught that it is better to avoid unnecessary trouble; the fewer complications the better(多一事不如少一事), and if speaking up doesn't change the outcome, then don't speak up. But times are moving on and people are becoming more aware of what we should do. I see more and more Chinese people online and in real life starting to speak up for themselves, albeit weakly and not with a lot of attention, but starting is a huge step. I hope I am one of them, to express and show my ideas through different mediums.

Who are Chinese people? Chang points out that “History is the great arbiter of cultural identity. In mainland China, 5,000 years of dynamic history in a huge land have resulted in a culture of fifty- five minority groups and one majority group, the Han. All are officially considered "Chinese" by virtue of their common cultural heritage. To quote Madame Dai Ailian, "Chinese not by blood, but by shared culture.”(156) People share the same culture, even though they live in different regions, not only mainland of China, but also Hongkong, Taiwan, and Chinese immigrants across the whole world. All of those people could be identified as Chinese, regardless of the polity.

China has 5,000 years of history, and its civilization has been passed down to this day. Chinese characters, the only pictographs still in use in the world, have been passed down from oracle bone script. You can look back at today's simplified characters to see the complete evolution of Chinese writing. There is still a wealth of cultural knowledge to learn. I hope to share this rich cultural knowledge with international audiences. Therefore, the desire to combine contemporary dance forms with traditional Chinese culture was one of my experiments and main ideas when I came to study at SLC.

For me, working cross-culturally is actually building a bridge between the art and culture of two countries that can be circulated. I prefer to share Chinese culture and traditions with more people so that more people can get to know and understand Chinese culture. My aim is not to make people distinguish between different cultures, but to tell others, through my own work, something different from the Chinese culture expressed by the media. Culture is not the same as politics or government.

3.2 My experience with producing cross-cultural pieces

After I attended the ADF(2019), I had a simple idea to present elements of traditional Chinese culture in the form of contemporary dance. But I never really did it because I was always scared and didn't know where to start. SLC's dance program focuses on choreography. We have a class called "Time-Based Art" in which everyone in the class produces a piece each semester to refine and understand their ideas by getting feedback from faculty and classmates. It wasn't until the beginning of my second semester at SLC that I decided to at least start trying, whatever it was. Yet, in my first semester, I still didn't have the courage to start trying. The direction I started was a Chinese philosophical concept: Yin and Yang (阴阳), which is a very typical Chinese philosophical culture. My very first thought was that since I started with the most basic, I would naturally not make too many mistakes. But now that I think about it, why am I apprehensive about making mistakes? Maybe that's one of the points I've always been afraid of, is that the responsibility of being a bridge between two cultures seems to be very heavy as well.

My first attempt was to make a duet about Yin and Yang(阴阳), combined with a chessboard. Through the relationship of the two dancers, the change of space, and the opposition and unity of movement, I expressed the concept of the opposition and unity of Yin and Yang, the

indispensability of one without the other. With the step-by-step refinement of my work and the feedback I received through my TBA class, I slowly began to discover the differences between Chinese and Western creation. Through the research, I think the main difference between the West and China is that in Western culture, dance is used as a subjective expression to describe the choreographer's personal feelings, while in China, dance is used as an objective description to explain phenomena or events. John Jasperse¹¹ and Beth Gill, the instructors of TBA, often asked me questions during the conference. For example, what do you think about this concept? Why do you think this concept is important? Why is the pattern of Yin and Yang presented as a very important part? Questions like that. I don't know how to answer these questions. For a while, I didn't know how to answer. But I started asking myself, "Yes, why? What are the points that attract me to these things?"

In the process of making a cross-cultural piece, an important question arises: "What is the focus?" The outer form of the dance or the inner cultural meaning. To better understand this core issue, in the third semester, I chose the concept of the five elements, another Chinese philosophical reflection. No props are present, only movements and changing formations are used. The five dancers, using the characteristics of the five elements and the relationship between them, focused on the idea of Xiang Sheng (相生). The five elements are generated by the changes in movement between each other, each producing the next, and also sequentially overpowering the other. Xiang Sheng is the way of each in producing the next. According to this concept, wood produces fire; fire produces earth; earth produces metal; metal produces water; and water produces wood.¹² I personally feel that it wasn't a success, because it is difficult to bring the audience to the specific environment or background without any characteristic props.

¹¹ <http://johnjasperse.org/about/john-jasperse/>

¹² https://www.chinesethought.cn/EN/shuyu_show.aspx?shuyu_id=4148

As an art form, the audience tries to appreciate the performance with their own experience. Thinking back to the question, I believe that the characterized props, which I introduced in my final thesis project, are important in providing specific contexts for the performance of cross-cultural pieces.

Another question arises too. Do I need to ensure everyone else understands some of the so-called cultural basics before enjoying the work? As noted in my Introduction, Cai needed to give the audience some explanation before her performance. But this is a long-term problem, and I still started a new creation with this problem. With a deepening understanding of the culture, I wanted to explore the traditional props in the contemporary form.

In this last semester of creation, I continued on with the Five Elements and also added different props. I started to use some very traditional props, such as Chinese-style lanterns(灯笼), classical dance water sleeves(水袖), oil paper fans(油纸伞), and wooden fish(木鱼). In experimental rehearsals, my dancers were asked to try out these props for dance. These dancers did not know how to use these props beforehand, and they had not used them before. But they opened up a new perspective for me to explore the use and existence of traditional props. As I mentioned before, boxes limit my imagination in the choreography. When I personally see these props, I actually form specific ways of using them in my head. So I think the dancers' new ways of using props are in some ways helping me to break down the barriers between the boxes.

The final presentation of the work was not the original idea, it changed during the rehearsal process with all my dancers. However, its presentation and rehearsal had a great impact on me, not only in terms of a deep and personal understanding of Chinese culture, but also in terms of opening up a new path of exploration. I actually thought about why I chose these props. I knew that many Chinese artists would explore the concept of ink and calligraphy or landscape

painting. But I wanted to go for a little bit of a new perspective and I started thinking about what I thought the Chinese props were, which ones, and why? This time the performance didn't only demonstrate simple philosophical concepts. So many things I could feel in the performance, and it was hard to describe in words. I am so excited about those things that I couldn't explain, and I will keep working on it.

When the show was over, there were many audience members who told me that it was beautiful. Actually, I didn't want to create a piece with deeper meaning, and I just wanted to be able to show some of the props related to culture through my work. If audiences feel good, they will be interested in learning more about this culture. In fact, I have also received some different feedback. For example, "You want to spread culture, you did not come here to experiment to find your own personal ideas about art. " "You seem to be in your own comfort zone, afraid to take risks". Maybe on the one hand, I have stayed in the familiar and comfortable circle of Chinese culture, and maybe I am not as pioneering and individualistic compared to my classmates. Personally, I have been looking for the relationship between culture and the individual, or how to read, understand and then transmit culture from my own personal perspective. However, on the other hand, I have been experimenting to find my personal insights into Chinese culture. It is a long-way experiment, and I have just started to explore it.

Conclusion

I am excited about finding the boxes in my body and connecting them to my dance training and choreography. The culture behind the dance form, and the relationship between the body and the dance form, still attracts me to keep searching for it. As a dancer and choreographer with an extensive training background, I am constantly asking myself." What can I do in this new space?" and "How much time do I have in this country to explore new perspectives?"

Bibliography

1. Tenaglia, Susan. "The New Face of Chinese Dance." *The World & I*, 10, 2001, 88-91, <http://remote.slc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/new-face-chinese-dance/docview/235858737/se-2>.
2. Chang, Shih-Ming Li, and Lynn E Frederiksen. *Chinese Dance : In the Vast Land and Beyond*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2016.
3. Wilcox, Emily. *Revolutionary Bodies : Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520971905>.
4. Marincola, Paula. *The Sentient Archive : Bodies, Performance, and Memory*. Edited by Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2018.
5. Thomas, Helen. *The Body, Dance, and Cultural Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
6. Mezur, Katherine, and Emily Wilcox, eds. *Corporeal Politics : Dancing East Asia*. Studies in Dance History Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.