

Transculturating Bodies: Politics of Identity of Contemporary Dance in China

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Contemporary Dance in China: Bodies, Transculturating

Modern/contemporary dance¹ is by history an art of crossing-boundaries, a story woven by traveling ideas and geographic migrations, as shown by what occurred in the People's Republic of China. In 1902, Yu Rong-ling, a Chinese diplomat's daughter living in Paris, studied briefly with Isadora Duncan, one of the pioneers of American modern dance. She performed Duncan's "Greek Dance" in the Royal Palace of Empress Ci Xi. Denishawn and Irma Duncan's Russian students performed in China twice, in 1925 and 1928.

Shanghai in the 1920s-30s was indeed a cosmopolitan, transnational space, full of people from all over the world. The Russians introduced ballet, while the Western ballroom dance became the social dance in no time. Around the same time, some independent artists ventured to combine the oriental and occidental dancing notion in their new choreographic creation (Feng 2002). Two exponents of this new artistic endeavour were Wu Xiao Bang (Zu-Pei) and Dai Ai Lian. Wu staged his first new dance in 1935 in Shanghai, with only an old lady from Poland in attendance. In Japan, he studied under an Isadora-influenced ballet teacher and Shijingmo, a follower of German dance theoretician Rudolf von Laban. Wu drew his movement from daily life and martial arts. He also took the cue from Laban's quality of feeling, strength, and direction as well as Shijingmo's idea of visual aspect of dance. His repertoire, such as *The Fire in Hunger*, reflects the outrage at the tragic life of the ordinary Chinese after the Japan war, resulting in a series of dance concerts with political themes. Eventually, Wu opened the *Heavenly Horse Dance Studio*, where he tried to apply German modern dance concepts to Chinese themes and music.

Dai, trained in the Royal School of Ballet, Ballet Rambert in the United Kingdom and had stints with Mary Wigman and the Jooss-Leeder schools. She returned home to pursue her passion. She discovered other forms in China's hinterland, creating her signature 'drum dance' – a theatrical transformation of the Yao's ethnic group original. But these first seeds of Chinese 'new' modern dance were soon deeply buried in the nation's political upheaval that lasted for almost four decades.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as happened to many, Dai was sent to a remote village to do menial work. Dance was politically deconstructed under Jiang Qing, then

Mao Ze Dong's wife, the honorary artistic director of the Beijing Dance Academy. Madam Mao constructed 'propaganda ballet,' a ballet repertoire with a proletarian message. She created eight dances/operas in the same manner and that was all people were allowed to see. A protagonist in *Red Detachment of Women*, arguably the most famous repertoire of the era, is a peasant girl who was oppressed by a landlord, and found liberation from the revolutionaries who helped her topple him. The dancers were children recruited from poor families in the countryside. They were sent to Beijing to do rigorous training for years to be world-class dancers.

Dance made a late comeback in post-socialist Mao society, in contrast to modern and contemporary Chinese visual arts, which started right away in 1979 after Deng Xiao Ping's reforms were declared at the Plenary Session of the XI Central Committee in December 1978.

In the context of post-Mao Chinese history, modernity has its centrality in economic, bureaucratic, and social rationalization, which is congruent with a state-sanctioned integration with the capitalist world market and its hegemonic ideology (Xudong 2000). Chinese art historians rightly consider 1979 as the starting point of a modern and contemporary Chinese art (Köppel-Yang 2003). It witnessed the first changes in the institutional structure of the official arts scene carried out in late 1978 and early 1979 as well as the first alternative semi-official and non-official exhibitions like the often-mentioned *The Exhibition of Stars* (Xing Xing Meizhan/Stars Movement).

In the 1980s, as in the era of the Chinese Republic, the political and social transition imposed a redefinition of the Chinese cultural identity (Köppel-Yang 2003). At the beginning of the 20th century, the intellectuals' self-appointed task was the creation of the culture of a nation both Chinese and, at the same time, modern. With the scars of a traumatic Cultural Revolution experience and the vacuum of ideological and spiritual leader, artists and intellectuals considered it necessary to make a kind of self-introspection (*fanxing*) to question recent history and its impact on society, culture, and the individual. With the experience of this recent past, facing the opening to the West and the Party's programme of modernization, the primary task again was to redefine the nature of a modern Chinese culture. In accordance with Deng Xiao Ping's slogans 'Let 100 flowers bloom' (*baihua qifang*) and 'Liberate Your Thinking' (*jiefang sixiang*), the artists made different propositions in their works of art, thus contributing to the discussions on a theoretical level. This spurred new thinking/questioning on humanism based on the recent experience and past, a revision of its ideological foundation (Köppel-Yang 2003).

Strangely, contemporary dance was 'excluded' from this reform discourse – as was rock music – both being viewed as 'dangerous,' and more, not considered a representation of Chinese modernity. When the door was finally opened for contemporary dance in late 1987, it happened in Guangzhou (of Guangdong province). Guangzhou was the first city to take up the 'Open Door' policy at large, not conservative, cautious Beijing, nor yet-to-be-revived Shanghai.

Yang Meiqi, then principal of the Guangdong Dance School, was invited to do a fellowship in the United States in 1986. Upon her return, her proposal to open its first, four-year Modern Dance Experimental Class, in 1987, was first met with resistance by the government. But later it materialized with the support of the Provincial Cultural Bureau, the Asian Cultural Council, and the American Dance Festival. The school's curriculum constitutes a systematic study of technique, improvisation, choreography and theory of modern dance. Eighteen dancers were recruited from different areas whose backgrounds were in the various traditions of Chinese folk dances and ballet. "Many were already professional dancers, so it was not an easy task to introduce new vocabularies to their already trained bodies" (Yang Meiqi, personal interview, 2004). The American Dance Festival (ADF) sent American experts to conduct intensive workshops for the class and later also invited the school's best graduates to perform at a festival in America. Guest teachers from other countries (Sweden, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong) and one from China also came to teach.

Contrasting and linking the Euro-American historiography of modern dance with the one in China, it is useful to take up Ortiz's 'transculturation' as a concept to describe the transformative process undergone by a society in acquiring foreign cultural material – the loss or displacement of a society's culture due to the acquisition or imposition of foreign material, and the fusion of the indigenous and the foreign to create a new, original cultural product (Taylor 1991). By 1987, the American modern/contemporary dance had already become hegemonic, as represented by the creative/artistic works of its artists and the theoretical discourse of its experts (the whole body of cultural/dance/performance studies). However, to adopt the concept based on the ideas of 'resistance,' 'opposition,' or a conflict between hegemony and counter-hegemony, and to describe a process in which new and authentic culture is born on the very confrontation between the dominant and dominated (Chen 2000) is not only simplistic but also neglects the complex historiography of modern China itself.

It is true that the Guangdong School teaching materials reflect the American dance education, along with the contents of specific dance techniques (Graham, Limon, Cunningham) and its creative process. But Yang Meiqi's approach, albeit inspired by her visit to the United States of America in 1986, landed on a different cultural soil with its own centuries-old, strong dance culture. Modern dance's *liberation du corps credo*, in order to give 'different languages' (of body) so as to open possibilities in creating, was carried out uniquely in recently re-opened, fast-changing China.

My outline will attempt to show how the works of the Chinese contemporary dance artists result in aesthetic diversity and became a cultural identity that is 'modern and Chinese,' and not 'modern and American/Japanese/German/others.'

Opening the School was only a prerequisite for a higher goal—forming the *Guangdong Experimental Modern Dance Company*, China's first official modern dance company in 1992.

The company housed young, talented choreographers who create their works and engage in collaboration and performance. They toured internationally, gaining rave reviews and for almost a decade contributed to the reconstruction of China's modern identity ('a face') through culture. Many prominent Chinese now working choreographers (both in China and abroad) are graduates of the Guangdong School, or visited the School for training, albeit for a short time.

China in the 1990s constantly grappled with the rapid growth of a consumer-oriented economy and the relentless process of globalization. China's joining the World Trade Organization pushed the Opening forward, not only in trade but also consequently, in culture. Seven years after the opening of the Guangdong School, Beijing finally opened the first class of modern dance in 1994, a four-year degree programme, at the Beijing Dance Academy. This was followed by the founding of the *Beijing Modern Dance Company* (BMDC) in 1996. It was then a local government supported company and had the famous dancer/choreographer Jin Xing as artistic director. Jin Xing soon left the company, pointing at government censorship and interference in her artistic decision as her reason. She moved to Shanghai in 1999 to establish her independent *Jin Xing Dance Theatre*. Willy Tsao, a Hong Kong choreographer and a longtime collaborator/contributor to contemporary dance in China, took over BMDC and generated his own mostly private funding sources. He is still there until now, dividing his time between Hong Kong's City Contemporary Dance Company and Guangdong Modern Dance Company (which he re-took over in July 2004). One of the former dancers of Jin Xing, Wen Hui, also set up her own company in Beijing in 1994, the *Living Dance Studio*, the first independent troupe with its latest theatrical style.

Now, in the 2000s, judging from its frequent exposure and magnitude of activities – onstage performances, television programmes, and widely-promoted competitions – dance is undoubtedly part of this accelerated openness. There are at least 6,000 professional dancers² working in Beijing, mostly in numerous state-supported dance troupes (the so-called 'Song and Dance' troupe in every '*danwei*' or working unit, including military ones) and national-flagged ballet companies performing in a big-budget, commissioned production such as Zhang Yimou's *Raise The Red Lantern* (taken from his critically-acclaimed film) that toured around the world. Along with globalized Chinese art and movies, these are carefully packaged and marketed as China's cultural productions, evocative of Chinese identity.

Nevertheless, it seems that this promising circumstance only applies to certain dance styles and forms, i.e., ballet and various traditional Chinese dances, including the modernized forms of ethnic minority dances that earned a lot of support from the state as part of its inclusive policy to support the minority communities through education and promotion of cultural expression. Meanwhile, contemporary dance remains, again, excluded from this euphoria, staying as a peripheral desire.

In Beijing, for example, exposure to ballet and traditional performances are palpable. Repetition in ballet repertoire – like four *Swan Lake* by four local/international troupes in a month – happens throughout the year, so does Chinese traditional dance, which is a regular performance in Beijing’s main theatres. In contrast, in the span of my nine-month research (from December 2003 to September 2004) for this paper, there were only less than ten performances of contemporary dance in Beijing, with local troupes accounting for less than half. Except for the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, not one of the other companies is supported by the government. Meanwhile, the arts infrastructure in the so-called Chinese transnational spaces (King and Kusno 2000) (Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou), a potential ‘market’ for contemporary dance, still operates in a bureaucratic way and/or is heavily market-oriented, creating a double structural barrier for artists to perform. The management of theatre spaces and other related regulations such as official permission for performing is legally unattainable for independent companies.

However, things were bound to change. A big dance festival in Beijing in 2004 (about to take place as the researcher finished the fieldwork and about to leave the country) started to include well-known modern/contemporary international companies such as the American Alvin Ailey and German Susanne Linke. At home, after a successful tour in France in 2004, the Beijing Modern Dance Company (a private-funded troupe) was finally invited to accompany the President’s official visit, together with other cultural delegation, to perform in South America later the same year – something that had never happened before.

But as Yang Meiqi, the main mover of Chinese contemporary dance, said, “It’s been 17 years [since the opening of Guangdong School], change is way too slow” (personal interview, 2004). Despite its international high profile, modern dance remains merely a ‘class’, a programme of study, in China’s dance academy, not a department. A decade after its first opening at the prestigious Beijing Dance Academy, the programme’s continuity is not even guaranteed automatically, since the decision still comes from the officials (party comrades) who know next to nothing about dance. The Academy is also notorious for being ‘closed’ to outside ideas, declining project offers from other parties, including foreign cultural centres. Moreover, modern dance class graduates – unlike ballet or Minzu³ dancers – have few opportunities to join a stable dance troupe, so many of them go to teaching jobs, while the few interested juggle things to be able to pursue the art they are passionate about.

The general dance audience, those who throng performances and pay the expensive tickets, still favour ballet for its fascinating technique and ‘beautiful’ ballerina bodies, or the exotic Minzu dance that satisfies their curiosity for an inner yet foreign culture in China’s 56 ethnic nationalities. The latter, too, indulged in modernizing their local, ethnic dance, giving it a ‘modern’ touch – here interpreted into those balletic, Chinese operatic or acrobatic dance vocabularies, glittering costumes to lure the audience while promoting the minority culture. This taste corresponds to the old-fashioned dance education, which emphasizes the production of the

so-called ‘dance machine’⁴, dancers who can perform amazing techniques such as incredible, athletic feats, gravity-defying split leaps, *tour jetes*, perfect Peking-opera style jump turns, acrobatic tricks and flips and cartwheels.

A young choreographer, Xiao Xiang Rong, used a strong allegory for contemporary dance in China as the ‘Chinese Unicorn’, a strange animal with a horn and a scarred body in Chinese legend. Audience familiarity with ballet aesthetic or their curiosity to see modernized minority dances makes the works of contemporary dance – deemed too complex, with strange, ‘daily’ movement with its lack of linear narrative – appear as foreign bodies. But no matter how strange and foreign these bodies are, contemporary dance in China stubbornly exists as a persistent desire, born out of, and on, a transculturation process.

Conceptual/Methodological Framework

Bodies of Transculturation, Transculturing Bodies

By showing a sample of four choreographies limited to recent dance concerts, I will attempt to show how these cultural products accommodate Ortiz’s concept of transculturation (via Taylor and Young 2001).

Transculturation Categories

1. Transculturation is the acquisition of foreign cultural material and the loss or displacement of a society’s culture due to the acquisition or imposition of foreign material. Its concept operates as a product of the people, the effects of cultural translations through the processes of geographic migration. Ortiz rejects the term ‘acculturation’ because it implies the assimilation of indigenous groups into the dominant culture. Transculturation does not describe cultural contacts as such, nor the cultural synthesis that may be its eventual product, but the moment of passage from one culture to another in which different heterogeneous cultures collide and ferment in a concoction or stew.

2. Transculturation also means the fusion of the indigenous and the foreign to create a new, original cultural product. This disarray also enables the reinvention and re-inscription of cultural materials that may have been transmitted by a culturally dominant group, so that forms of modernity, for example, can be refashioned and re-inflected.

In *Transculturacion narrative en American Latina* (1984) as cited by Young, Angel Rama rejects notions of intercultural transfers that emphasize the dominant role of the transferring culture, whether externally and internally, and instead adopts Ortiz’s concept of

transculturation to demonstrate the impact of indigenous texts on other kinds of Latin American narratives. Martin Leinhard has shown how the practice of Andean popular culture emerge in a cultural diglossia whereby 'the language', discourses, and icons of the colonial power serve to disguise and preserve a forbidden native content.

Dance Categories

In my analysis of the dance corpus, I will integrate and intimate Ortiz's 'transculturation' with Susan Leigh Foster's three of five categories that offer a blueprint for reading choreography (choreographic meaning) (Foster 1986)⁵:

1. Modes of representations: the way the dance refers to the world through four methods, i.e., *resemblance*, *imitation*, *replication* and *reflection*. Although all four might appear in any given dance, one usually predominates and this mode, as it signals worldly experience, implies a stance toward the world that is crucial to the dance's meaning.
2. Styles: the way the dance achieves an individual identity in the world and in its genre. Any stylistic choice in dance implies a background of alternatives rejected in favor of some feature of movement that lends distinctiveness to, by signifying an identity for, its bearer. Thus the term *style* has been applied to several aspects of the dance: individual dancers exhibit a personal style, dance movement may occur in a given style, choreographers can be identified by their style, and even dance traditions may be said to embody a certain style.
3. Vocabularies: the basic units or 'moves' from which the dance is made.

Findings: Discussion and Analysis

Four Examples of Transculturating Bodies

Living Dance Studio's Report on the Body

Founded in 1994 by choreographer Wen Hui and filmmaker Wu Wenguang, the Studio is an independent group whose performance productions are created through a working collaboration between dance and theatre performers, visual artists of all genres, musicians and writers. The performers are both professionals and amateurs. With each performance, they aim to combine dance and theater with a variety of visual art media, using this method to communicate stories and experiences relevant to the realities of contemporary life (*Public Space and Persona Eyes* 2003).

The Living Dance Studio (LDS) is the first independent dance theatre company in China. Wen Hui, a Beijing Dance Academy graduate and a former dancer of the Beijing Modern Dance Company (under Jin Xing), studied modern dance in the United States in the early 1990s. LDS now has some core members – artists, not necessarily dancers – who have other day jobs. Treating the company as their laboratory, experimenting with elements of dance, theatre, literature, visual and multi media, their performance is workshop-based, relying on research and personal exploration of its members in relation to the whole creative process. They are also open to collaborating with other artists/amateurs.

Wen Hui is a well-traveled artist, learning not only various dance techniques abroad (mainly the United States), but also venturing into different cultural engagements. This includes participating/conducting workshops, collaborative performances, research, cross art-forms experimentation in various countries where she worked with both professional artists and amateurs. She cited Pina Bausch as her influence, but was often misquoted as a student of hers. She actually just observed a workshop at Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal, and later met Bausch after her performance in Paris. Thus, she is more of a true admirer than a student.

In 2002, the LDS staged *Report on the Body* in Beijing. Based on the troupe's workshop, the LDS worked on contemporary issues centering on the 'body'. The piece had toured internationally in 2003 and 2004, i.e., to the United States of America and Europe (Germany and France in 2003; and the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland in 2004). The company members engaged in stages of workshop-rehearsals, experimenting with texts, movements, and images. Adopting an 'open policy', the LDS drew the attention of artist friends – video artists, theatre directors, foreign artists – some of whose invaluable inputs were incorporated into the piece. It tells about the contemporary life in China, how "the body is a passage, a channel, which if followed along its course leads into a sea of dreams and desires. This is the road that these people are walking, where various things currently popular in China, things that are the scenery of our

daily lives – hairdressers, massage and sauna centres, provocative adverts and the rest – are spread out like a shop window display” (*Public Space and Personal Eyes* 2003).

Destroyed bodies, people stuffed with false, bulging lumps on their backs, bellies and butts, enter the stage, rigidly posing like robots, moving to the audience area, observing. As the piece unfolds, artists, all professional dancers except two who are a French theatre performer and a Chinese literature writer/critic, explore the stage, their dancing/acting/monologue juxtaposing with the wall-video projection. It is all about the body, all about obsession in China’s commercialized, urban areas. Mounds of clothes that bury the people underneath, headless pretty *qi pao* (cheongsam) exudes vanity. Bathhouses, once a personal necessity, are now ‘a shrine to collective physical pleasure, offering saunas, massages, manicures, back rubs and so on, even food and drink’ (*Public Space and Personal Eyes* 2003).

In a dance-theatre-video setting, Foster’s representational modes take the fore in turn. Dancers/actors’ response to the clothes (in mounds; taking them on/off, wrapped; swept aside, thrown out) replicates and reflects the obsession with the body. A dancer imitates the character A-Zhen, a country girl living in Beijing who became a shampoo girl and masseuse, whose series of narrative texts reveal a person who works for this ‘body-worshipping’ industry.

The style is inspired by Western dance-theatre, movements delivered as daily gestures, mundane emotions; it is a synthesis of dance, theatre, video ironically and surreally portraying, the radical change China is going through.

Wang Mei’s *Thunder and Rain*

Now teaching at the Beijing Dance Academy, Wang Mei once went to Guangdong School for two years to learn the modern technique. In 2002, she staged *Thunder and Rain*, a dance-theater based on *Thunderstorm*, a drama written by a famous Chinese writer, Cao Yu (1910-96). It has been staged as a popular play by local groups since the 1950s and as a ballet repertoire.

Wang Mei first worked on the piece with the Class of 1998, the class she taught for four years. In 2004, she reworked the choreography with a set of different students (Class of 2002), whom she never taught before. What I had seen is the rehearsal of the latter as Wang Mei was trying to explore an alternative ending for the dance.

Thunder and Rain is an intricate love tragedy, involving six main characters whose passions are entangled in each other’s social role, destiny and choices. Zhou Puyuan, master of the feudal family, has an affair with the family maid, Shiping, when he is young, and she bears him two sons. After he marries Fan Yi, he keeps Shiping’s elder son, Zhou Ping, and send Shiping away with the younger one. She marries a butler and they have a daughter, Sifeng, who

again works as a maid for the family. Later, both Zhou Ping and Zhou Chong, son of Fan Yi, fall in love with Sifeng. An entangled family history unfolds in what turns out to be a tragic ending (*China Daily*, 6 June 2002).

Wang Mei's focus is on the complicated, entangled emotion and suffering of each character, delivering them in quick, short movements between dancers engaged in a closed space on the spacious stage. There are no high jumps but interactive movement reflecting each character's relationship with the one she/he dances with. For example, anger, vengeance, and shame lie between Fan Yi and Shiping. The overall mood is depressing, set by the music, movement, and monologue. Wang imitatively portrays each character's emotion, the inner conflict in relation to the other. The strongest one is seen in the two *pas de deux* between Fan Yi and Zhou Ping (stepmother-stepson affair). The first was when Zhou Ping seduces Fan Yi (first she resists, then surrenders), and the second is when Zhou Ping rejects Fan Yi after falling for Sifeng.

Wang Mei choreographed the emotionally-charged movements with facial expressions, imitating the characters while applying Foster's reflection representational modes. Originally, she worked the piece with the students she knew very well and whose dance vocabulary she shaped through her class. She said she choreographed *with* them, asking them to be active (personal interview, 2004). This time, working with students she never taught before proved to be a challenge. The hardest part is when she had to get rid of the 'ornament', the 'beautiful body' so inscribed on the dancers: the ballet-like posturing, the cheerful facial expression, and the vague inner emotion. Known as highly disciplined and strict in her class, she surprisingly asked the students' and her colleagues' opinion, post-rehearsal. One of her former students-turned collaborator said that the after-rehearsal discussion was the only time Wang Mei is open and 'democratic'. Her style uses precise steps, timed movement-music, and expressive dance phrases that were far from flowery.

Unlike the cosmopolitan Wen Hui who is fond of international exchange, Wang Mei is openly 'closed'. She admitted that she is not interested in working with foreign artists, performing abroad or inviting guest teachers for her students. What she is interested in is to do a work she likes and enjoys doing, and as for teaching, to make the students go through the same enjoyment.

The Dance Corpus of the Latest Generation: "We Are/We Write Love"

Resigning from both the School and the Company in Guangdong, Yang Meiqi decided to lead a four-year class in modern dance, this time in the Beijing Dance Academy, but only because she was offered full freedom in teaching approach and material. She could even take the selected students far away from Beijing, to a nice, rather remote village outside Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong.

Given 28 of the best young dancers, she contacted the Asian Cultural Council, American Dance Festival, and the French Embassy for co-operation. She assembled teachers from China, the United States of America, and France. In addition to the various modern techniques (American Graham, Limon, Cunningham; improvisation from the French teachers), history of dance, she added Chen style *tai chi* and multimedia. At the end of their study, the students created graduation pieces. The best four were performed in March 2004, three months before graduation ceremony. I picked two of them, titled *We Are* and *We Write Love*, for their depiction and importance.

'*We Are*' is collectively choreographed by Dai Jian, Meng Ying Zhi, and Wu Yan Tan. Danced by 11 people all in their early 20s, the piece belongs to the abstract dance, portraying them as an intimate bunch of people bound by some ties, but at the same time celebrating their youth. The dominant modes of representation are replication and reflection, an eloquent demonstration of flowing and fluid movements by the virtuosic dancers. Supple-strong bodies swaying, falling down, rolling over, rising; shivering, contracting, releasing. Accompanied by rhythmic music, the style is simple yet rich, minimalist yet maximal.

'*We Write Love*' is a work of Dai Jian and Ma Kang. The onstage performance was combined with the projection of videos. This piece has a clear narrative storytelling – the angst and beauty of being young, with screen images/onstage movement clearly co-related. Starting with a video showing a young couple trying to reconcile on two giant screens, later their screen existence is extended to real people onstage. They also expanded to perform out of the stage's wing door and in front of the front row, the move 'in and out' of the screen, both 'spaces' smoothly juxtaposing. Using this representational mode of 'resemblance', it sets spatial fragmentation of encounters such as teens bumping into each other between the school walls, getting drunk in the park, and fills it with continuous movements to unspool the stories as well as the moods. All represented moods are reflective: mellow, happy, funny, angsty, witty, vulnerable. Juggling styles from different musical backgrounds (light jazz, Chinese pop song, Gregorian-like choir) transform the movements. At times, they are caricatures of daily expressions, other times movement syntheses in stylized *pas de deux* delivered by four sets of young lovers, describing longing, desire and seemingly playing with the idea of negotiating gender equality. Both pieces are a portrayal of the young, global Chinese – urban, cosmopolitan, MTV-generation, yet in constant search of individuality and meaning in life. It ends with a serene, uplifting final scene. Dai Jian and Tuan Ni, the lovers, are dressed in loose white robes with their bald heads. They write their love dance through some intimate movements of rolling over, engaging, on a green grassland.

Conclusion

Transculturating Bodies as Politics of Identity

The four dance concerts sampled for this study quickly show how contemporary dance in China, whose early life and survival relied on cultural contacts and exchange, mainly from outside China, managed to create a body of original work out of acquisition of foreign cultural material. Mostly trained in both Chinese and Western dance techniques, the artists' choice of theme, modes of representation, styles and vocabularies, creative exploration is anything but cultural-transplantation (imitation) of the foreign culture (the cultural practice of contemporary dance) they acquired. Instead of blindly succumbing to the foreign influences, they contextualize foreign influences into their own experience, environment, problems and expression by looking at their surroundings (in *Report on the Body*), revising an old story to reveal/reflect the present (in *Thunder and Rain*), or generating collective/generational expression (in *We Are* and *We Write Love*).

The bodies in *Report on the Body* are capitalist and schizophrenic. *Thunder and Rain's* bodies are passionate, desirous yet oppressed, entangled at the convergence of a rigid social structure, and a picture of disintegrating humanity in a feudal, patriarchal society in a corruption-ridden China of the 1920s. Meanwhile, the bodies of *We Are* and *We Write Love* are youthful, vulnerable yet hopeful.

These transculturating bodies create for transcultural dialogue, exchange, translation and transformation. A product of China's transformative process and once a closed world for such a long time, the contemporary dance artists avoid the trap of being pretentiously exotic ('Chinese and Chineseness'). They do this although they are faced with the threat of Western cultural imperialism embedded in the proliferation of contemporary dance throughout the world. An example would be the organized projects promoted by powerful institutions such as the American Dance Festival (Chen 2000).

It could be said that in a globalizing China/Asia, contemporary dance, a traveling, transnational cultural product does not exclusively belong to the cultural group it was born in (Western, more specifically, American),⁶ of a Euro-American centric hegemony. It also exists in the Asia-Pacific, Africa and probably the Middle East, the only difference being that it carries its own cultural historiography, develops its own bodily logic and *lingua* and finally writes and choreographs its own cultural identity. All these build a historiography that requires consistent and continuous inquiry in order to formulate its own body of theories.

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¹ Although the phrase 'modern/contemporary' [with the slash] appears occasionally in this paper, especially in the early part, I decided to follow John Martin's differentiation of the term. According to this first American dance critic (1933, 1965), the term 'contemporary dance' is not synonymous with 'modern dance'; he first concluded that modern dance implies a method of *negation* [italics from me] of those types of dancing which are neither classic nor romantic. Following a Euro-American centric historiography, the early modern dance was a repudiation of the tenets of 19th century ballet, including its emphasis on spectacle and virtuoso display (Elizabeth Dempster, 1998), with the line-up of its exponents includes figureheads such as Loïe Fueller, Isadora Duncan or Mary Wigman while contemporary dance encompasses not only a wider timeframe but also artistic styles. However, in the Chinese context, modern dance (*xiandai wudao*) has a different meaning, referring to the definition of contemporary dance applied in this report. In the realm of China's dance scholarship, the direct/literal translation for 'contemporary dance' in Mandarin (*dangdao wudao*) refers to those 'new' creation of folk dances which have gone through changes ('modernised') by the contemporary artists through application of 'appropriate' adjustments of the movements, costumes or other artistic elements of the dance concerts while they still hold the basic forms. For sure, this understanding and scope are quite different from the one which, I think, has become an international convention.

² Precise numbers are not easy, this is a prediction of Willy Tsao, artistic director of Beijing Modern Dance Company and Guangdong Modern Dance Company, interview, May 2004.

³ Dances of Chinese ethnic minorities (nationalities). Government acknowledged 56 nationalities, including the majority Han.

⁴ Almost all artists interviewed used this term, 'dance machine', when they referred to their dance education, especially those who graduated in the 1980s.

⁵ The other two categories are: 1) the frame, 2) the syntax. I chose the three that I find most relevant for serving my analytical purposes.

⁶ More on how modern dance is deemed 'American', see Anderson, Jack. 1997. *The Art Without Boundaries*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.