

***Inter-Viewing Socialist Dancing Bodies: Moving and Voicing in the U.S.***

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**Abstract**

In October 2021, I interviewed three Chinese professional dancers who had completed undergraduate dance degrees in China and pursued their MFA in Dance degrees in the US. Their bi-cultural experiences and unique training narratives motivated me to re-search the Chinese dancing bodies beyond the borders. In this article, I draw on Robin Nelson's methodologies of Practice/Performance as Research and Diana Taylor's Performance Studies theory of the archive to examine the performativity of my interviewees' dance experiences and my own educational experiences in both the US and in China. I explore how Chinese dancers, with their distinctive, yellow-skinned appearance, embody the national spirit and cultural traditions of China as they navigate various dance practices across the diverse landscape of the United States. Through their daily movements, these dancers inhabit a space of in-betweenness, leaving indelible but untraceable traces of their experiences on their bodies. My analysis delves into how these dancers, through their encounters in the field of dance and performance in the US, reinterpret their cultural memories, social identities, and socialist ideologies through choreography. Drawing from my own cross-border experiences between the US and China, I approach the examination of their performances through interviews, textual analysis, and movement interpretations. Additionally, I aim to uncover what these Chinese dancers have gained and lost through their academic studies in the US. Drawing on Layla Zami's concepts of PerformMemory, which explore the intersection of memory, movement, body, and space, my bilingual research serves as an archive for Chinese bodies to reclaim their socialist dance heritage and reconstruct a national spirit. It seeks to dispel misconceptions about Chinese professional dancers by treating individual body narratives as tangible archives, manifested both on the social stage and in daily life performances.

*A Performative Memory: An online interview is a digital performance. Two human voices joined, connected, and then danced in the meta-space. Body used to be a key figure in this performance, now relegated to different time zones, temperatures, and locations behind the frontstage. Internet performs; it connects and secures bodily data through surveillance and hosts the live performance invisibly based on the measured megabits per second (Mbps). In this digital performance, the world clock finds an intersection, a shared time, followed and located by memories from the past and beyond...*

Due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), I was quarantined<sup>1</sup> in Tianjin, China after I traveled via an international flight from Los Angeles, USA. After 28 days of quarantine, my life finally got back to normal, and I began my research in China in 2021. Between October 2021 and May 2023, I reached out to interview fourteen Chinese dancers who trained as full-time Chinese dancers in China’s top dance schools and had an academic learning experience in a US dance program. The first online interview performance for this project occurred October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. By July 2023, I had successfully interviewed, met, and conducted follow-up interviews with twelve. Seven interviewees obtained their undergraduate degrees from Beijing Dance Academy, and five graduated from various dance schools in mainland China. As Chinese dancers who were all born in the 1990s mainland China, the two interviewees selected and discussed in this article aim to contribute to a comprehensive image of Chinese dancers’ performing, living, and moving in both China and US dance programs. By incorporating Robin Nelson’s methodologies of Practice/Performance as Research (PaR) and Diana Taylor’s Performance Studies theory of the archive, Layla Zami’s PerforMemory notion to examine the performativity of my interviewee’s dance experiences, and my own educational experiences in both the US and mainland China, this article highlights a group of people and their experiences. The research documents their bicultural experiences in the US and China under muted, invisible, unheard, and untitled “performance.” As Diana Taylor states in *Performance* (2016), bodies can produce, reserve, and transfer knowledge, which could be read as a process that has the potential to shift methodologies and disciplines in scholarship. With this in mind, Robin Nelson’s book (2013) offers several research samples by placing the human body at

the center of the stage, which allows my interview process to focus on body knowledge and non-literal knowledge as a priority.

Throughout this article, I examine how these yellow-skinned dancers carried a Chinese national spirit and bodily traditions in their experiences in the landscape of diverse US dance practices, finding in-betweenness in their daily movements and leaving untraceable memories behind their bodies. In addition, I analyze how Chinese dancing bodies re-choreograph their cultural memories, social identities, and revolutionized bodies in the field of dance and performance in the US by elaborating on my own trans-national learning experience in the US and China to re-read the “performance” through the performative interview, textual analysis, and movement interpretation. Last, I discuss what these Chinese dancers gained and lost in their academic studies in the US. This article questions how bodily memory, an embodied archive that re-oriented socialist bodies in a transnational space, performed dual identities in the US.

I connect my insider and outsider perspectives and experience in China and the US, then employ embodied theories such as Layla Zami’s “PerforMemory” from her book *“Contemporary PerforMemory: Dancing Through Spacetime, Historical Trauma, and Diaspora in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”* to connect constellations of thought, such as the notions of the ephemeral/eternal, memory/movement, and body/space. The words ephemeral and eternal hold a deeper significance while Chinese dancers transmit their nationality, race, and culture from Beijing to the US. Even with all their “belongings” packed up, parts of their lives and identities fade out in the US and turn ephemeral in many nuanced ways. Based on my own educational experiences and the conversations I had with my interviewees in this research, this type of loss provides space for new growth. Memory and movement are two key components that emerged in my interviews; my interviewees show how they infuse their embodied memories to respond to non-Chinese movements and collaborate with non-Chinese dancers, then highlight Chineseness in the performative scene. Zami (2020) puts weight on analyzing how cultural memory and dance performance interweave and “may inform and transform access to traumatic pasts, current power relations and perceptions of

(post) human futures at a personal and a societal level” (17). Zami aims to challenge the traditional notion of the body and dance and believes dance is a practice that has the power to resist the hegemony. By elevating the voice of performing bodies of color, and by giving transnational attention to choreographers and dance scholars of color, Zami’s research builds an innovative link between hegemonic discourses in Western capitalism and dancing bodies as their own sites of scholarship and knowledge production. Zami suggests that the body is the midpoint between crossing conceptualizations and realizations, and dance could be viewed as “an epistemological medium function as a fundamental tool for processing historical trauma in relation to current sociopolitical relations” (17). In her book, Zami employs the term “PerforMemory” as a compass in which she sees memory as “a site of movement: moving back and forth, and blurring the borders between past, present and future, between countering absence and performing presence, between understanding and imagining, between emotions and reflections, between science and fiction, between transformation and liberation, between knowledge and truth” (29).

In this article, I elaborate on Zami’s concept and attempt to explore how the “PerforMemory” could better support my vision and voice in this performative research that allows me to collect and transfer body memories and movements across nations and spacetime. By honoring and acknowledging Chinese and English languages in an equal position, this bilingual-conducted article creates an “original” space for Chinese dancers to re-perform their identities and bodily testimonies to ease cultural and language barriers. Through this article I rethink the paradigms of performing bodies and movement identities using a performative analysis across transnational and shared spaces.

### **Cultural Memory as Embodied “Texts”**

I use Cultural memory instead of Chinese memory as an umbrella term to focus on how individual Chinese dancers’ collective memories experienced in China were performed and acted out in the public sphere in the US. This does not mean I view these Chinese dancing bodies as a “whole,” but aim to connect the individual voices from the cultural studies perspective to view the body movement as a culture and cultural performance.

French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs developed the notion of collective memory in 1950. Halbwachs (1992) believes individual memory is formed from the group and consistently influenced by a second or third person beyond themselves. In addition, people from various social groups share memories and knowledge differently. Halbwachs argues that memory can only play within a collective context and is deeply associated with the group's identity. By doing a close reading of my interview data (textual and movement) in this article, I do not hesitate to group these performative movements as a cultural phenomenon that shaped and constructed dancing bodies in a group memory context. In their book, Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B. Young (2008) classify cultural memory into two levels, based on the general understanding of cultural memory and an emphasis on the interaction of past and present in sociocultural contexts. The first level is bonded with biological memory and seamlessly parallels Halbwachs's collective memory theory. Erll, Nünning, and Young state, "No memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts" (5). The second level of cultural memory is for social groups to build a co-shared past based on the symbolic order, the news, institutions, and more. I bring this into conversation with the work of sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, who was a student of Erving Goffman. Zerubavel (2003) states that the physical and the symbolic are not separate; instead, they shape each other as bodily sites of memory can shape the stories people tell about the past. Here, cultural memory is tangible and visible social movements, marked by changes in public places and lasting impact on individuals and communities after everything is completed. As Diana Taylor (2016) writes, "Some performances pass by in a flash, leaving nothing (apparently) but a memory" (20). What follows in this article are my interviews and my account written as a performative memory. I discovered my interviewees demonstrated a similar collective memory from their previous dance learning experience in China. I explore how these cultural memories were transferred and re-performed in diverse formats in US dance classes, such as Choreography, Movement Technique, Repertoire, Pedagogy, and Research Methodology.

***Kathy: Oral-ChoreoMemory***

Yi, An /Tianjin, China 7 am - Kathy/Phoenix, Arizona, US 7 pm

“I am here :)” Kathy’s message and emoji appeared on my phone, and then she occupied my windows screen, zooming from Arizona. She began to share that her dance journey started at the age of four. Even though Kathy had lost her visual memory of her first dance class in childhood, she said, “I know we had some exercises and pieces of training that were really painful at that time.” In dance scholar Emily Wilcox’s (2011) dissertation she applies the “New Man” concept from Chinese historian Yinghong Cheng’s work to convey the Chinese word 吃苦, which means to eat bitterness or overcome hardship. Cheng (2008) states that both China and Cuba borrowed Soviet-style thinking from the spirit of the New Man reform in the early 1960s. In addition to men, the new Soviet woman emerged as having no personal interest ready to endure any bodily hardship, maltreatment, and sacrifice. In the Chinese dance field, the idea of physical endurance appears as a “self-taught” lesson for an individual student to embody physical virtue and meet the socialist spirit by tempering hardship and physical endurance in their daily training. In Kathy’s anecdote, the physical pain also carries a political spirit as a propaganda performance performed by dancers’ everyday movements, which are often dismissed as part of the training process. As Ban Wang (1997) states, “politics can be made to look and feel like art” and “this experience is both political and aesthetic, both public and intimate” (33, quoted in Chen 2017).

Kathy’s body memory could be seen in her emotional tone, facial expression, and rhythm of her breath. As a Chinese dancer, I could sense the Chinese spirit and memories embedded in her dancing body in the US. Like all other Chinese dancers I interviewed, Kathy’s biological body gradually accepted and became obsessed with the pain of a changing older adult dancer. I connect this to Taylor’s (2016) argument, “We can also think of performance as an ongoing repertoire of gestures and behaviors that get reenacted or reactivated again and again, often without us being aware of them” (10). Here, Kathy’s physical pain was dissolved and reproduced as a natural performance, external to

internal, corporeality to ritual, performed harmoniously between personal memory and national ideology. The interview continued with Kathy’s thoughtful and detailed bodily memories. However, when she elaborated on her classroom learning experience in China, she shifted and changed the accent and tone by repeating sentences and English words. She said:

“...teacher, the instructor they came to the class... and they just teach, teach students how to do that. And they just repeat, repeat, repeat, *until they* feel like the students are perfect for that combo, and they are done. Ok, that’s the whole class; they are done.”

Zami (2020), states that the interview process is a double-level translation, in which the interviewer translates the interviewee’s body movements into oral words and their oral testimony into words. By exploring, coding, and connecting to Kathy’s performative oral expression, I sense Kathy well-choreographed her memory testimony by playing with word patterns, rhythms, time, and structure, in which she (re)repeated the instructor’s classroom performance choreographically and reordered the imbricated movements verbally. It is possible to say that Kathy tried to translate her physical “archive” from Chinese time-space to the US, but the sentences lost the original patterns and meaning, which created its own blurry space, left room for imagination, and more. Here, the Chinese memory and the experience she carried into the US re-choreographed her English mindset, situating her in between the two linguistic ideologies. By examining Kathy’s performative sentence as research evidence, it could be explained how Chinese dancers carry more than one bodily identity and cultural memory in their diaspora studies in the US. Each moving between past and present, creating a performative zone in their Chinese soma. In her dissertation “Blurring the Color Line,” performance studies scholar Crystal Kwok (2023) argues that blurring is a tool to present a more profound and exciting way of knowing. Blurry notions challenge dominant power by looking into in-between spaces often neglected. Here, Kathy’s performative statement between each word choreographed blurry sentences, and her bilingual ability and transcultural experience failed to help Kathy speak her body memory appropriately. The argumentation that Kathy tries to present is blurred, uneven, fragmented, and mosaicked; from these vague sentences, we witness how Kathy’s physical memories in China re-orientated her body in the US landscape.

“There is one thing you want to know?” This question came from Kathy.

“Yes!” I answered.

“I think that for some reason, the teaching process and training process has some really good beneficial side. For some reason, it gives me a lot of things. I think in China, the dancers have really good technique, their bodies, generally they have good dance technique than most American dancers. I can feel that. So, I am still grateful and appreciate my teacher who is in China because she gives me, she has sort of really traditional or really rigor training approach which help me, help my body to get better.”

Zami (2020) believes in viewing body memory as a site of movement “invites a new perspective on the past and incites a transformative experience of and in the present” (92). I can relate to her perspective on the training and teaching processes in China. Kathy’s Chinese body movements as counter-hegemonic narratives help her reflect hegemonic influence in American academic productions. Her rethinking the differences between Chinese and American dancing bodies invites us to ponder further how Kathy’s socialist spirit and bodily tradition helped her to speak in white-oriented culture, empowering her Chinese body, dance, and movements to finally find a legal place in the US. It is not hard to imagine how Kathy’s Chinese body was measured, evaluated, and critiqued in non-Chinese spaces in the US, and how her original body lost meaning in one space and gained a reputation in another. Kathy’s heartfelt reflection on her Chinese body more clearly states that Chinese dancers consistently carry two bodies and “vocabularies” in their dance journey in the US, finding a place to translate, stage, and voice their bodily tradition and belonging and mark the Chineseness and movement lexicon in the dance classroom space. Kathy’s Chinese dance training earned attention in the US dance field, which legitimized a space for her Chinese body memory to continue its “performance” in the US.

Based on Kathy’s dance training and learning experience in China, I see this as a time to point out the pedagogy issues that remain controversial conversations in the field of dance. By doing so, I would like to offer a comprehensive perspective in this article. Since all my twelve interviewees graduated from Beijing Dance Academy and had similar training experiences, as illustrated by their interviews, I see it necessary to clarify the historical context here.

### Chinese Dance Pedagogy and Training Process

Since the 1950s, Chinese dance and Xiqu have been engaging in academic discussions to enhance their respective art forms. In theatre scholar Joshua Goldstein's book *Drama Kings* (2007), Goldstein views *xiqu* actor training as carrying multiple emotional and social significances, and physical pain and countless repetitions as an unavoidable process of training, which reshapes and polishes young actors' natural bodies to be ready for a proper aesthetic of stage performance. As Goldstein states, "Only after being remolded into properly supple and receptive material, physically and mentally, were students deemed ready to receive instruction by expert actors in their specialty plays, a process that stressed meticulous imitation" (37). As a full-time Chinese dancer, I experienced and witnessed how *xiqu* training and movement patterns are embedded as a vital part of Chinese dance learning and teaching progress. Some *xiqu* movements, such as gait (*tabu* 踏步), eye contact (*duikan* 对看), Cloud hands (*yunshou* 云手), and mincing steps (*suibu* 碎步) are still included as core movements in Chinese middle school dance study plans. Unlike Western realist theatre, *xieyi-ism* Chinese *xiqu* emphasizes conceptualization (*yijing* 意境) and emotion (*Qing* 情) in the daily learning and training process. For instance, as Goldstein (2007) explains, meticulous imitation is the core of *xiqu* training, which requires students to imitate first and create second. This means students must successfully copy and embody the movements before they can play them with their creative thoughts. In addition, to convey *yijing* and *qing*, *xiqu* training requires practitioners to collect everyday life movements and pretend to be the character. For example, if the male performer inhabits a female role in the play, the performer's training calls upon him to embody the movements with his own critical and artistic lens while seeking to understand feminine movements from the inside out. In this process, the performers first seek to achieve exquisite bodily techniques and practice in-depth observation, then layer their own critical and artistic lens into the performance. So, imitation is a core method to reach non-realistic aesthetics, which requires performers to obtain high-level body expressions and techniques to deliver the abstract story vividly. Ah Jia's theory of *xiqu* is quoted in Min Tian (2008), where Ah Jia indicates, in

*xiqu*, the performance conventions that convey emotions should be regarded as skills that are acquired through rigorous training; emotions expressed in *xiqu* are not solely a result of an actor's inner experience, but rather, they are also subject to technical training and presentation.

In Chinese dance, dance teachers adopted the *Xiqu*-based pedagogical approach in classroom dance training, which dance scholar Fangfei Miao (2020) calls “sample teaching.” As a Chinese dancer and dance scholar, Miao connects the dance pedagogy with *xiqu* and martial arts and views the showing-doing-repeating as a way for students to revisit the existing knowledge and develop an in-depth understanding. Miao argues, “Students, through learning and even internalizing the prioritized combinations, acquire mastery and comprehension at significant levels” (59). By triangulating Chinese dancer Kathy’s transcultural bodily memory with the scholarship from theatre scholar Joshua Goldstein, Ah Jia, and dance scholar Fangfei Miao, I see that the Chinese dancing body moved in non-Chinese cultural space, processed its own biochemical transformation with others, as well as with movements and desires, and completed their Chineseness in the inter-central zone. That is to say that Chinese performing bodies consistently enter and exit the liminal phase, where self-identity is reproduced, blended, and updated each time by moving from one social performance to another.

Kathy, a Chinese dancer pursuing her master’s degree in choreography in the US, culturally, socially, and choreographically re-constructed her Chinese-ness and physical movement in the US landscape. With her daily body awareness, Kathy transmits social knowledge, bodily memory, and a sense of belonging through reiterated actions in the US (Taylor 2016). Zami explains that the word “memory” is deeply connected to the body, allowing for complex, layered, and non-competitive narratives. Thus, Kathy’s bodily memory demonstrates how Chinese dancers embodied the national spirit and bodily traditions in diverse contexts of US dance practices. These dancers consistently look to find a balance in their daily movements by reconstructing their identity and cultural memories in the field of dance and performance in the US. By doing that, Kathy gained her body reputation in her academic studies in the US, and her bodily memories and socialist identity became

the instrument in a transnational space in the US.

The interview with Kathy continued after Zoom completed the conversion. The performative and felt experience of the interview continued to stay with me intellectually and somatically through dance and memory, body and time, from where it began to our senses. Both of us in this dialogue performed various identities of “self” from different life stages to dance stages.

### **Finding in-between Chinese(ness)**

Yilin Wang/*Off-stage Memorial “betwixt and between”*

Yi, An /Tianjin, China 5 am -Yilin/Greensboro, North Carolina, US 5pm

Yilin shared that in her first year of study at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, her daily challenge was entering into a dance space, sitting around a circle, giving a brief self-introduction, and ending with “Nice to meet you.” She used the term “social phobia” to describe her experiences and this “Circle Performance.” The classroom scenario is performative and theatrical in multiple ways: the students perform the self-introduction by presenting personal information with specific orders (name + year) and passing the pre-choreographed sentences around the circle before the class officially begins. Participating in this “Circle Performance” meant the individual body was quoted from language and physical presentations as they presented themselves in the circle. It seems that Yilin felt that her Chinese dance and language abilities were not acknowledged as valuable in the space she was in, which made her feel “disabled”. During the live “Circle Performance,” she was the only participant who couldn't read and reference the scene, which created a sense of exclusion. How does the Chinese dancing body participate in higher education scenarios in the US? What performative role does the body play? And where does the scene take them? Yilin uses her personal story to answer these questions and shows how her cultural memories and social identity were reinstalled in the US dance scene. Taylor’s (2003) notion of scenario enables me to analyze the Chinese dancers’ “traumatic” responses in the classroom space in the US. Following Taylor, scenarios generate/transfer/produce humankind’s body to be able to perform the social

actor and physical skin simultaneously. Here, Yilin’s Chinese body and traditions were challenged in the classroom scenario in the US; the memories and social skin she brought from China failed in her transformation from a Chinese dancer to a classroom participant. Yilin had lost the familiar scenario in which she had been dancing in China and was finding and fitting her dancing body into this new space called America.

During the interview, Yilin emphasized twice that “I was really afraid, especially when everyone was watching me talk.” Again, following Taylor, scenarios normalize the extraordinary. Based on Yilin’s experience, I would like to say that scenarios also de-normalize the ordinary. In this classroom scenario, the physical body inhabits the place, and later bodily archive inhabits the space (Florida 2005). The dance classroom scenario was re-constructed by the accent, social skin, and embodiment that the individual body carried and then performed as a social performance in the classroom space. Here, the regular classroom setting masked the particularity of the human body. By accommodating all of them in one scene and time, as Yilin’s former cohort, I sense that Yilin’s dancing body faced cultural barriers in US dance spaces. First, Yilin found herself in a new and unfamiliar environment when she moved to the United States. Although she physically participated in new surroundings, her cultural memories and ideological patterns continued to remain dominant. This resulted in a weakened connection between her bodily sensations and the reality around her. As a non-English speaker, Yilin’s Chinese mindset and language system had a significant impact on her classroom performance in English-speaking countries like the US, preventing her from engaging in the class discussions and in bodily participation, as well. Here, I ask how Yilin’s culturally “disabled” body was translated as “normal” in the US dancing space. How did the space re-choreograph her movement traditions? What material and non-material relations shape, create, and inform her Chinese body? Connecting Yilin’s story to Zami’s hegemonies conception, it is clear that the academic and cultural hegemony is confronted by Yilin’s Chinese dancing body in the US. Here, dance as its own practice and knowledge has the means to reveal the hegemonic context and discourse for dancers of color, reflecting the absent body in Western capitalism and inviting a revised notion of body, movement and dance.

Yilin’s interview and discussion of bodily memory took our conversation from the dance studio space to the lecture room, as she recalled her dance lecture classes during graduate school in the US. The lecture course Yilin referenced is “Dance Studies: Theories and Methods,” which was a required course for graduate students in their second year. This course usually combines students from different years and with no more than six students in the class. Yilin told me that it seemed everyone in the class was supposed to say something after each question. For example, Yilin shared with me that the instructor asked students to summarize the thing they were working on in a few sentences, and she had no idea what to share and how to express it. She always grabbed one or two sentences that were prepared in her mind to share in the class. Unsurprisingly, Yilin’s Chinese once again failed to shift her biological character to the non-Chinese scenario, and her body lost its meaning and identity in the classroom space. Yilin gradually allowed these “disabled” moments to happen in the classroom space and started to re-learn the “language” from her cohorts. According to performance studies scholar Sansan Kwan (2013), “Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience” (cited in Soja 1989). Here, the dance space was reconstructed by dancing bodies from diverse social and cultural backgrounds; Yilin’s Chinese identity was reproduced in the US dance space, where her cultural memories and ideological patterns lost their originality and meaning in certain ways.

Unlike Kathy Luo, who was navigating two bodily traditions and cultural memories in the US dance space, Yilin Wang carried her Chinese lexicon on the top of the American one, situating herself in Chinese-themed performances in the US classroom space. Yilin’s Chinese dancing body re-choreographed her learning experiences and memories in the US, gaining and losing the original meaning at the same time. In so doing, she practiced Chineseness and simultaneously learned what it meant to be a student in the US during her studies there.

By showing Yilin’s classroom performance in the US, I would like to point out how performing bodies have often been misread and misunderstood in other cultural contexts. Here, I make a detour from the Chinese dancing bodies in the US and borrow from the

thinking of European theater scholars, such as dramatists William Butler Yeats, Antonin Artaud, and Bertolt Brecht, who are often referenced in the American theater studies canon to show how they borrowed from and adopted Asian theatre concepts (particularly Chinese and Japanese) in their intercultural performance/theatre work. By analyzing and presenting their “original” performing works, I am eager to draw a theatrical line between my interviewees’ dancing bodies in the US context and the non-Asian performing bodies in the “Oriental” theatre space. In doing so, I see that Chinese dancers’ bodily performance could not be translated into a European or American context without understanding Chinese “tradition.”

### **Performing Asianship On The Stage**

Intercultural theatre scholars have crossed cultural and national boundaries to study and perform “others” that do not culturally relate to them. They are dedicated to infusing their body knowledge and ways of knowing in the “transformation” process; as Richard Schechner argues different cultures collide and fuse with each other; that is what we call intercultural performance (Harding and Cindy 2011, 98).

Dramatist William Butler Yeats’ “Nō” plays, heavily rooted in his Irish imagination and based on his anti-naturalist aesthetic and self-faith, later invented his “aristocratic form” to interpret and replace the Japanese Nō drama. However, his lack of historical background and lived experience of Nō prevent him from being placed in an appropriate position in Nō drama creation (Tian 2018). Tian (2018) argues that Yeats’ Nō” plays “must be put in their proper historical place as a displacement of the Japanese model” (91). With this in mind, Modern European theatre artist Antonin Artaud—who read sacred and religious Balinese dance hand gestures and movements according to his own “double” displacement and self-centered belief—displaced and distorted Balinese theatre. As Tian states, “a violent displacement of it and a systematic projection of his ideas” (163). Two examples here show that insufficient cultural knowledge led to their research remaining merely superficial, lacking a deep understanding of the Oriental culture, and failing to perform culturally-biased copy and paste from Bali to Europe. A similar issue also happens with theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht. Brecht saw Mei Lanfang’s performance in Moscow in 1935

and believed the Chinese artist's artistic goal in Peking opera was to appear strange and surprising to the audience (Tian, 2012). In the mid-1930s, Brecht paid attention to Konstantin Stanislavsky's theoretical framework, which impacted his understanding and interpretation of Mei Lanfang's performance and the rewrite of his early scholarships. Later, Brecht's idea of the "Alienation Effect"<sup>2</sup> (A- effect) was driven by Mei's performance; also, his main theories, such as the non- Aristotelian, epic form of theatre, are a contrast to Stanislavsky's concepts (identification and consciousness). As philosopher Jacques Derrida states, "No translation would be possible without "difference," (in Tian 2012, 183) which reminds us that Brecht's translation from Mei also carried certain errors. Tian states that Brecht's "resultant interpretation of Chinese acting is actually a subjective concretization and elaboration of his own theory: a displacement of Mei's art and Chinese acting in terms of his own theory" (183). For example, Brecht uses the term "decorously expressed" to describe the unique body movements that Chinese opera performers convey on the stage; however, in Chinese acting, any inartistic movements could count as awful rather than "unnatural" (196). From Brecht's own perspective, Chinese actors can be interrupted at any time. Tian shows how Chinese actors connect emotionally and spiritually to the character in the performance and borrows tons of evidence from Mei's performances against Brecht's misunderstandings. Listing Mei's play and narratives as pieces of evidence to show how Mei embodied himself in character in an unconscious way that allowed him to be creative, Tian called this "the effect of beautification" (197).

From here, we can see how the idea and movements of Chinese acting were displaced through Brecht's theoretical interpretation. Indeed, misunderstandings are embedded in European theater figures' intercultural theatre works of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century. However, Fischer-Lichte describes "the creation of a world culture in which different cultures not only take part but also respect the unique characteristics of each culture and allow each culture its authority" (Tian 2008, 3). William Butler Yeats, Antonin Artaud, and Bertolt Brecht all produced "Oriental" theatre with their own interpretation and imagination, with less research and theoretical work performed.

My point in this section is to borrow these significant intercultural works as a springboard to show the Chinese diasporic dancing bodies, such as my interviewees Yilin Wang and Kathy Luo, how their bodily acts were misinterpreted and displaced by the audiences. For example, Kathy Luo shared her experience in the Philosophy of Dance course, and she was labeled as a shy student by her professor. Kathy said she was described as “less active and proactive” because she followed the course with mental, rather than verbal, participation. Kathy told me that her professor commented on her class performance by saying, “She comes off as shy.” As a Chinese student, I resonate with Kathy’s experience and am eager to know the reason behind it. I continued to ask, “Do you think the professor made the right comment?” Kathy said: “Not exactly; part of the reason was that I was not very familiar with the new culture and the (educational) environment at that time.”<sup>i</sup> I believe that Kathy’s personal experience can be traced back to the cultural misunderstanding between China and America, and it is possible to say that intercultural misunderstandings that happened in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre are still relevant in 21<sup>st</sup>-century dance. While this is a very big comparison between centuries of thought, social settings, and culture, I still feel a nugget of similar experience is present and important to identify. As a Chinese dancer enrolled in a US dance program, my own body experience tells me there was something that could not be translated through language, only through body movements, but often was pronounced with the US “accent.”

As I write this paper referencing American authors and those who have choreographed in the US, I am perhaps misinterpreting and displacing the American authors, artists, and educational systems. My recognition of Interculturalism is that it is a concept that, at its best, emphasizes the interaction and exchange between different cultures within a society and values coexistence and mutual learning. The goal of interculturalism is to recognize and celebrate cultural diversity, promoting dialogue, understanding, and respect among individuals from various cultural backgrounds. This is unlike the assimilation that happened within the intercultural exchange in the cases of Brecht, Artaud, and Yeats, which suggested merging different artistry from diverse cultures into one dominant culture. My suggestion is that there are ways that the universities that presented Wang’s and Luo’s works could have a positive impact on promoting cultural diversity and enriching artistic

expression. The steps the universities could take include hiring professors from diverse dance fields, adding dance classes that are non-ballet and modern, and admitting students from around the world. By committing to and performing these steps, universities could correct the misinterpretation and displacement for future performances.

### **In-between**

I attended the Fall 2021 Dance BFA Thesis Concert Livestream at the University of North Carolina Greensboro Dance Theatre on November 21, at 8:30 am Shanghai Time, 7:30pm US Eastern Time. Yilin Wang, the only MFA choreographer from China in the show, presented her choreographic piece *in-between* with four other BFA choreographers in this 90-minute thesis concert. Yilin’s choreography “*In-between*” weaves six dancing bodies, five of whom were non-Chinese. By performatively inventing a porous space for both audiences and performers moving in and out, here and there, and back and forth, the piece allows the dancers to cross the border and language and co-forges an intangible dialogue in dancers’ memories, identities, and bodily translations. Even though Yilin did not physically show up on the stage, as a Chinese dancer watching the live stream performance, I could kinesthetically sense the notion of “*In-between*,” which mirrors Yilin’s three-year trans-border experience. I could see through the diverse cultural choreographic choices and movement vocabularies she applied. With the Chinese classical music fade-in, the dancers depart from their socially structured US bodies and transfer toward the second, Chinese body. In this transforming journey, the dancers entered a liminal space where they completed the reborn, re-live, and re-known process by performing the movements such as rolling, sliding, spontaneous jumps, and street walks. These performative movements assisted the dancers in pronouncing Chinese movements and ideology in this shared space. The dancers walked together counterclockwise and circled their bodies before the duet staged in the center of the *yin-yang* symbol. Here, Yilin infuses Chinese-ness into one, American male performer’s moving body. With that, the body was granted more than one national representation and was choreographed by the location. Here, we could see how two social vocabularies co-performed in one dancing soma, which forged transnational dialogue moving in and out in the *yin-yang* symbol at

this moment.

Yilin conceived the piece as a vessel, incorporating Chinese philosophy and US aesthetics into her own in-betweenness performance. She states in the program,

“The work was inspired by exploration and breath and intertwined Chinese Classical dance with contemporary dance, applying the role of yin-yang from Chinese Taoism. Set in four parts, it represents Chinese history and the idea of “起承转合”<sup>ii</sup> which is initiation, development, transition, and culmination. The work offers the audience different visual expressions, bringing an exchange of Chinese classical and contemporary dance to life.”

Yilin’s thesis performatively choreographed her in-between living experience in the US by infusing daily-life memories into dance movements. The choreography allowed Yilin to voice herself with her dual-cultural roles as a Chinese citizen and a student from the US. Sansan Kwan (2013) states how Chinese people carry their bodily experiences through various places with them in their understanding of who they are and how they continue to relate to Chineseness. I argue that Yilin’s piece conveys national belongings, cultural identity, and transnational memories in a stateless time zone for audiences to practice their awareness and understand what Chineseness means. As the music shifted from contemporary to traditional Chinese melody, the dancers performed Chinese tones with their individual accents and ideologies, which invented new identities and meanings based on the choreographed movements. The lights went off, and applause broke out; Yilin’s choreography *In-between* continues and marks an invisible light in the US landscape.

Zami’s PerforMemory shows how stage spaces could be transformed by bodily performances and function as projection areas for embodied memory. In Yilin’s thesis work, the combination of two art voices (Chinese Classical Dance and Contemporary) demonstrates the harmonious effect with Yilin’s educational experience and aesthetic background in China and the US. Successfully, Yilin choreographed her Chinese spirit and body memories together and staged them in a theatrical space in the US, leaving an untraceable archive behind the on-stage performing bodies. Again, by using dancing bodies as a practice and power, Yilin invited the audience to removed away from hegemonic discourse, created a counteract hegemonic choreography in “white” space in the US.

**Conclusion**

Over the past year, I performed intensive data analysis for my interview research and talked with more than twelve interviewees of various dance styles, ages, and genders who graduated from BDA and other institutions in China. Due to the pandemic, all my interviews were conducted online, via either Zoom or WeChat. Since my interviewees are all Chinese, we used Chinese as our first language, and then I translated all of the Chinese interviews by myself later. By performing PaR to analyze these interview data and focusing not only on what they say but what their bodies say, this creative interview performance allows Chinese dancers' voices to be heard in a performative way. These interviews, rather than seeking "socially desirable"<sup>3</sup> responses, provide further insight into the transnational experience of Chinese professional dancers, which is absent in the dance studies field.

This paper reveals, for the first time, Chinese professional dancers' trans-boundary learning experiences in the US, based on the author's first-person perspective and embodiment in both US and China dance institutions. By highlighting dance as its own scholarship, the paper re-examines Chinese dancers' classroom "performance" and behavior, and considering dancing bodies, dances, and bodily movements in a global performance context. Using PerforMemory as method, this paper sheds light on underrepresented voices, bodies, and performances among a group of Chinese dancers, considering the performing bodies as social movements. Each interviewee's unique dancing experience in the US provides a valuable lens for dance scholars to understand Chinese dancing bodies beyond their physical scope and belonging, decentering the white and Eurocentric body movements that have been rooted in the dance world for a century. This article allows me, as a Chinese professional dancer, to perform my bi-cultural and transnational perspective, to make space for Chinese diaspora students, dancers, and artists in the US. Through performative analysis of the bodies that Chinese diaspora dancers carry in everyday practice, which have empowered historically marginalized groups in the dance field, this article also provides an original and contribution to the at the intersection of performance studies, dance studies, and Chinese dance studies.

Two Chinese dancers' embodied dance studies in the US invite us to re-think the diversity, internationalism, and equality in higher education. Based on the interview data, each of them seems to have grappled with a similar experience in their dance study in the US and China. Thus, this article homes in on the ways each interview suggests that Chinese diaspora dancers could achieve better academic performance and self-growth through diverse course schedules and multicultural learning environments that incorporate various pedagogical methods. This study raises several questions that could be addressed in multiple ways. After reviewing the data, several ideas emerge and lead me to consider the following questions:

1. What kinds of multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary methods with respect to diverse knowledge systems and ethics exist in Chinese and US conservatory training?
2. How have intersections occurred in the conservatory, and what is the impact on current dance practices through exchanges with international artists, teachers, and dance training systems?
3. How can Western pedagogy theory be incorporated into the Chinese education system by considering both political, social, and cultural differences?
4. What is the conservatory's mission in China? Does this mission prepare Chinese dancers to become universal citizens as well as creative individuals?
5. Who should teach in higher education, and what courses should be offered to equip them to become global dance educators?

Being an international student here as I write this article, I see how my body acts every second when I walk on campus and enter the bookstore, dining hall, library, and elevators, where two voices are always chatting, one as a Chinese dancer and one as an F-1 visa academic student. I carry my backpack on my body as a mobile home. The shoulder pads, straps, and zipper pulls create a trans-local memory and space with each footstep on US land, which labels my identity and Chineseness on my back, and in my gravity. I go forward, leap, and dance in this constellation, but my body always pulls everything back to where I come from, and what I belong to. I realize my body may never fully access "freedom" in the United States, and it may always dance with my feet in the People's Republic of China (PRC). My body may never find a place called "China," but it may settle

in the space with somatic memories and history.

My interviewees also left their Chinese voices and body movements in different states across the US territory. Their Chinese dancing bodies were located in different time zones and geographical spaces, but accenting Chineseness behind their performance, choreography, and body movement. Chinese dancers, a diaspora group living and moving between the US and China, carry bodily memories and cultural representations in daily dance classes in the US. In so doing, their performing bodies were absent and present at the same time, attempting to navigate the space between their physical location and cultural identity. By challenging their habitual way of presenting the human body in classroom space, they opened their body-minds to receive the uncertainties, unknowns, and riskiness and began to observe these transformations, performances, and revolutions from the first-person perspective.

By showcasing the bodily experiences and transformations of two Chinese dancers in higher education, this paper aims to re-frame Chinese bodies in the US. As I close, I see how Kathy Luo's childhood dance training paid off in the US dance technique class, where her socialist pain and endurance earned her recognition in a non-Asian space and time. I see how Yilin Wang opened her body-mind to a new culture and found her Chineseness and US ways in multiple locations in the US, as in her thesis concert titled *In-between*. What was even more remarkable was how they had all taken one life-changing piece of advice, which they had experimented with and explored through their body in PerforMemory space in the US.

Again, here I see the space to hear those beautiful bodies again, and I am thankful for their open hearts, sharing, and trusting.

Thanks, dancers! Yi, An

11/14/2023

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*“Dare to do it, I found myself...  
and the same for things beyond dance”*

*“Nobody Speaks For Me,  
and I Have To Speak For Myself”*

*“...But There's A Lot Of Spiritual Stuff Going On...”*

*Was More Interested In Showing*

*“I  
Where I Came From”*

*“You Just Have*

*To*

*Do Your Own Thing And Live Your Own Life”*

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<sup>1</sup> From the end of March 2020 to January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, travelers required quarantine for their international arrivals entering mainland China. The quarantine period varied in different cities, usually ranging from one week to eight weeks, depending on a traveler’s destination.

<sup>2</sup> “A-effect” is part of epic theatre theory; Brecht creates distance between the audience and character, reminds the audience of the artificiality of the performance, and calls this distance the “Alienation Effect.”

<sup>3</sup> Fontana, Andrea, and James H. Frey. “The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement.” In *Qualitative Research in Business and Management*, 1125–. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014, as cited in Bradburn, 1983, p.291

<sup>4</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>5</sup> 起承转合 means: beginning, development transition, and ending.

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