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Stefanie Sachsenmaier, Middlesex University, 2016

Ways of Doing, Ways of Thinking, Ways of Moving Together: Considerations for Cross-Cultural Encounters and Exchanges in and through Dance Practice



Rehearsals Guo Lei – *Mask*, Dancers: Huang Yu-Teng, Wang Bo, Katie Cambridge, Zhao Zhibo, Wu Shuai, Teng Yue, London, 2013. Photograph by Andrew Lang.

A performance research project bringing together artists and academics from Beijing Dance Academy, Taipei University of the Arts and from UK universities and conservatoires to engage in intercultural dialogue and exchange in and through the performing arts.
(Chris Bannerman, ArtsCross 2013)

What issues arise in the context of a research project when dance practitioners from different places and arguably different traditions work together in the processes of choreography-making? What debates unfold when the rehearsal processes are open to observation from invited spectators, and exchanges between practitioners and researchers are facilitated? How might differences that arise and commonalities that emerge, as well as what appear to be existing prejudices, beliefs and aspirations in such a context be constructively conceived? These opening questions plainly suggest a quite particular and indeed a rather artificial circumstance for dance or movement-based performance-making, but it is a circumstance that provides a fertile set-up within the framework of ‘international’ or intercultural or cross-cultural performance research. Within this precise framework a further question might be added: who holds and exercises power

and agency in this sort of circumstance, and what problems – if any – might such an uneven power arrangement uncover, for the different participants in such a scenario?

Since 2011 I have been involved as a participating ‘academic’ researcher in the project ArtsCross, which brings practitioners and researchers from China, Taiwan and the UK (as well as further researchers from Japan and the USA) together. My own role and the perspective I adopt in this article have been drawn together through contributions to organized discussions, conferences as well as written project blogs. Since the beginning of my involvement, different key episodes of the project took place in 2011 at the Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA), in 2012 at Beijing Dance Academy (BDA), and in 2013 at The Place Theatre in London. In each of these I developed a specific interest in how the encounters that took place between dance practitioners and researchers from the different cultures represented might be usefully conceived. In what follows I focus in particular on issues arising from the various encounters that the project facilitated: these include the challenges of verbal communication that the project entailed in organized conversations and debates, alongside and as part of the investigations in dance practice that took place in the studios, and in the final performances that were performed on the stages of TNUA, BDA and The Place Theatre in London.

In integrating dance practitioners from the cities of Beijing, London and Taipei, who agreed to work together towards publicly performed choreographic works according to set parameters, the project ArtsCross is set up to involve processes of cultural translation between practitioners from specific places that bring with themselves equally specific ways of doing and thinking. I have been able to observe that in each of the encounters that were and continue to be facilitated, sets of relational agendas are being instigated, which arguably tie in to complex historical and current political as well as cultural entanglements between the countries of origin of the practitioners involved. These agendas and the entanglements that have resulted from the encounters themselves have arguably brought into existence great complexities and difficulties, some of which I proceed to discuss in what follows.

In the present article I extend my thinking around the issues arising from the cross-cultural encounters in the area of dance, building on my earlier observations outlined in ‘Productive Misapprehensions: ArtsCross as a Cross-Cultural Collaborative Zone of Contestation of Contemporary Dance Practice’ (Sachsenmaier in: Colin and Sachsenmaier (eds.) 2016). Rather than simply bringing practitioners from different localities together to create dance works, the project ArtsCross set up spaces of encounter of practitioners as well as practices as such – practices as established in ways of doing in different cultural places and spaces. Dance practices were not

merely exchanged in the projects that unfolded, but crucially, in my view, the project gave rise to very particular experiences among the participants involved. These experiences may well have been transformative for those involved, and I would argue that they might lead to questions as to what constitutes contemporary dance practice as such. In the pages that follow I review the research agenda that framed the processes of choreographic practice and the production of knowledge that seemed to me to have occurred in those choreographic practices themselves – a change I propose to describe as ‘extra-linguistic’.

Research Set-Up

As Chris Bannerman (quoted above) made clear, the individual practitioners who were invited to take part in ArtsCross were inevitably also functioning as representatives of specific (research) institutions and more broadly locations or places – Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) from China, Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA) from Taiwan, as well as London’s Middlesex University, Queen Mary University, London, and further partner institutions such as The Place. They were joined by further invited academic researchers from Japan and the USA. Professional choreographers from China, Taiwan and the UK were creating new dance pieces with dancers from each place – some of these professional, others dancers-in-education – according to the specific framework that the project provided. There were different permutations of this set-up in the different editions of ArtsCross. In Taipei and Beijing (2011 and 2012 respectively), choreographers from Beijing, London and Taipei worked exclusively with dancers from BDA and TNUA, whereas in London in 2013, dancers from each of the three places were integrated in each of the choreographies that were created.

Rather than operating openly within the professional performing arts scene, it is worth emphasizing here that ArtsCross is grounded in the research domain. The framework within which it was set up was research-specific: it meant that choreographic works would be made within a specific time allocation, exploring a particular theme; they were required in addition to work with dancers from each of the cultural frames represented. Moreover, rehearsals would be open to observation by participating academic researchers, and the project furthermore instigated debates amongst academics and practitioners, with each edition of ArtsCross culminating not only in public performance presentations but also in an academic conference. As part of the 2013 edition in London, ArtsCross is explicitly outlined as a research project in the words of co-director Chris Bannerman, cited above:

A performance research project bringing together artists and academics from Beijing Dance Academy, Taipei University of the Arts and from UK universities and conservatoires to engage in intercultural dialogue and *exchange* in and through the performing arts.
(Chris Bannerman, ArtsCross 2013, n.p.; my emphasis)

In other words, the project provided a meeting ground for dance practitioners and academic researchers with an emphasis on the notion of 'exchange', which suggests to me at least that the concept of sharing already-established practices was at the basis of this undertaking. This emphasis on sharing established practices seems to me to have produced a lens that would tightly focus on the specific ways of doing and making work, as well as a particular aesthetic, as work was practised in the respective institutions and places. Yet the idea of exchange was complex: it took place on several levels – the dance practitioners were in one sense representing a particular place and an institution, but at the same time the focus on practitioners from these different places was that they should *make work together*, suggesting from the outset the need for compromise. Issues at stake in each choreographic process concerned the need to represent what was '*one's own*', coupled with the need for openness to the '*new*' or '*other*'.

In this context Erin Manning's discussion of research-creation (Manning in Colin and Sachsenmaier, 2016) seems of interest. While Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuck state that 'research-creation' is a widely-used term in the fields of the Social Sciences and Humanities in Canada and is equivalent to the term 'practice-as-research' as used in the UK and Australia, or 'arts-based research' in the USA (Chapman and Sawchuck 2012: 5-6), Manning defines the term in the specific context of performance practice as the 'transversal activation of the relational fields of thinking and doing' (Manning 2016: 138). Her words resonate with the notion of a plurality of voices from the field of practice-as-research, when she observes, along the lines set out by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), that 'making is a thinking in its own right, and conceptualization a practice in its own right' (Manning 2016: 134).

While at least some of the choreographers who took part in ArtsCross might not usually have thought of their work as research-creation, to use the term Manning proposes, engaging with the larger project as such proposed a preoccupation with a specific research agenda, which each of the practitioners agreed to engage with. Each choreographic work that was created was in this sense set up to work with specific research questions, such as the following: how can and will

dance practitioners from the different represented places work together? What issues will arise in the creative processes and how will they be negotiated? What issues will be debated alongside the dance-making processes by participants from different locations? What ways of doing and ways of understanding do practitioners from their respective places bring with them? What challenges will occur, what misunderstandings will take place, and what discoveries will be made? What are the possibilities and challenges of communication between practitioners from different places? (These questions, it is worth noting, resonate with those explored in many postgraduate performance-making programmes.)

In line with Manning's perspectives, a search for answers to these questions will need to embrace a tuning in to the extra-linguistic noted above, in that the specific processes of choreographic production that took place as part of ArtsCross entailed the potential to establish 'new forms of knowledge' (Manning, 2016: 133). Interestingly in what concerns the present project, and with direct reference to speculative pragmatism¹, Manning states that rather than taking the subject as its 'point of departure', it is the event that constitutes the basis for the formation of the 'subject of experience rather than a subject external to experience' (Manning, 2016: 135). More specifically Manning defines research-creation in the Deleuzian² tradition, as follows:

Research-creation generates new forms of experience; it situates what often seem like disparate practices, giving them a conduit for collective expression; it hesitantly acknowledges that normative modes of inquiry and containment often are incapable of assessing its value; it generates forms of knowledge that are extra-linguistic; it creates operative strategies for a mobile positioning that take these new forms of knowledge into account; it proposes concrete assemblages for rethinking the very question of what is at stake in pedagogy, in practice, and in collective experimentation. (Manning, 2016: 133)

Although Manning does not write from the specific context of cross-cultural dance practice, her insights can be usefully applied to the present context. In the above Manning provides a template for a perspective that centres on processes of experience on behalf of the practitioners involved. I propose to apply this template to the multiple events of choreographic practices that occurred as part of the project. The creative processes entailed, in my view, a heightened focus, awareness

¹ See Rosenthal 1990.

² See Deleuze 1989.

and receptivity of the 'relational' amongst practitioners from the different places, expressed and worked out in the daily studio and performance work that I was able to witness.

Choreographic Practice One

Guo Lei's Mask: 'a fusion of Chinese culture and contemporary awareness'

In several instances there was an identifiable concern from specific choreographers to create a choreography as part of ArtsCross that would represent a specific established dance tradition. In the London edition in 2013, choreographer Guo Lei, currently President of Beijing Dance Academy, created a work entitled *Mask*, in which he drew on an ancient mask tradition from Chinese Nuo Opera. Guo's choreographic aim was to produce 'a fusion of Chinese culture and contemporary awareness', and for the audience to 'experience a combined sense of tradition and modernity, presenting the ancient with the present, and a fusion of civilizations' (Guo in Choreographer Interview, ArtsCross 2013).



Performance, Guo Lei – *Mask*, Dancers: Huang Yu-Teng, Wang Bo, Katie Cambridge, Zhao Zhibo, Wu Shuai, Teng Yue, London, 2013. Photograph by Andrew Lang.

One of the stipulations of ArtsCross, as stated above, was that each choreographer had to work with dancers from each of the cities represented. Interestingly, the work *Mask* involved a single dancer from London as part of a group of Beijing- and Taipei-based dancers. Katie Cambridge continually stood out as 'different' due to what seems to have been perceived as a lack of a specific training grounded in a Chinese dance tradition. The piece was tightly choreographed, leaving little space for individual dancers to generate movement, hence the perceived struggle on behalf of the exclusively Western-trained dancer to fulfil the challenging score involving the work with the Nuo mask. The ongoing praise she received for 'doing very well' might well be seen as yet

a further confirmation of her different training background, and the challenge she faced to attempt to grasp elements unique to Chinese traditional dance.

What I want to further highlight in this particular instance of choreographic practice are the different sensibilities – a difficult notion to evidence in research terms – that are at stake from representatives of the different places integrated in the project. I suspect that many of us ‘sense’ the importance of cultural sensibility, without necessarily having the means to identify its operations in any event. From my informal discussions with others present, I know I am not the only participant in the project to whom Guo’s choreography seemed to be strongly rooted in an ancient Chinese tradition, rather than being concerned with what from a Western perspective might be categorized as ‘contemporary’ dance. Yet my ignorance was confirmed when I learned over the course of the three episodes of ArtsCross that I witnessed, that indeed in some seemingly ‘traditional’ choreographies, traditional dance elements were in fact challenged, and the term ‘Contemporary Chinese Classical Dance’ was used by practitioners and researchers from Beijing Dance Academy to describe such works. ‘Contemporary’, in other words, is locally as well as temporally determined.

Varying Perspectives on the ‘Contemporary’ – China, Taiwan and the UK

In looking more closely at the relationality³ that was at stake between the practitioners involved in the project, we need to consider not only the respective different ways of doing and thinking that might be practised in a given place, but also the processes of encountering ‘others’ who might bring unknown qualities to processes of working together. In this regard it seems important to bear in mind that the respective practitioners from the different cities and institutions involved in the project ArtsCross will not only have brought preconceptions relating to their own dance practices, but also preconceptions with regard to dance makers from the other places involved. Moreover, they will have brought with themselves highly particular experiences of their own training histories, training systems, and more broadly ways of dancing and making dance. In this specific context it seems worthwhile considering possible processes of hierarchisation that might be integrated into these sets of understandings. What conceptions of their own dance practice, and what conceptions, questions or curiosities might the UK dance practitioners have brought to the encounter with dance practitioners from China and Taiwan? Respectively, how

³ See Simondon 1989, 2007.

might Taiwanese dance practitioners have conceived of their own practice in relation to and in comparison with their ideas of dance practice in the UK and China? The same questions of course apply to the particular understandings the Chinese dance practitioners might have had before and at the beginning of the project. And then, we might ask, crucially, how have these conceptions been challenged and changed – in the short term and possibly in the longer term – through the experience that was facilitated by the project ArtsCross? What ideas might have been confirmed as prejudices and what others might have arisen that were not known before?

While ArtsCross specifically enquires into creative performance practice, the project clearly engages with some of the topics that are regularly debated in areas such as Global Studies or Global History, as well as Translation Studies, in that these respective disciplines provide a focus on issues of difference and commonalities, connections, interconnections and transfers, as well as the implicit processes of cultural interpretation and translation that are at stake in these.

In the introduction of the publication *Global Conceptual History: A Reader*, the editors Margit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier address issues of global encounters in the research area of history, highlighting that in the field for a long time little attention has been paid to ‘processes of transfer, translation and other entanglements’, but instead forms of ‘methodological nationalism’ were inherent in the perspectives applied (Pernau and Sachsenmaier, D. 2016: 3). The particular lens of global history, they argue, would instead allow for a focus on how encounters between different regions may not only lead to the formation of societies and cultures, but also of new concepts and languages (Pernau and Sachsenmaier, D. 2016: 3). Moreover, it seems important to consider that encounters crucially also potentially lead to the delineation and further developments of separate identities (Pernau and Sachsenmaier, D. 2016: 16). In the present context of encounters between dance practitioners from different places, in the processes of working together, certain aspects relating to what might be called practitioner identities might be further highlighted and pronounced: this might precisely be the case through the meeting of an acknowledged ‘(dance) other’ who might offer alternative qualities and characteristics to those of the respective individual practitioner concerned. Guo Lei’s *Mask* as briefly outlined above, in its inclusion of a non-Chinese trained dancer, has arguably further highlighted specificities to dance training in the wider Chinese culture, and in so doing, in relational terms, to the ‘European’ traditions.

Yet how might we describe such practitioner identities in the present project that clearly proposes a delineation of dance as practised in the different places and institutions, especially when we are also concerned with making new choreographic works that may not single out a specific dance

tradition that builds on a particular technical training? In my own view, making generalizations about dance in China, Taiwan or indeed the UK, drawn from the particular unfoldings that took place as part of ArtsCross, is highly important to avoid. The dance practitioners involved emerged from different kinds of training institutions, which similarly, in my own view, does not allow for a broad comparative analysis of dance practice. The UK commentator will readily identify differences between – for example – a Rambert-trained dancer and other practitioners of contemporary dance, while from a Chinese perspective the differences between Chinese Classical Dance and the variations in Contemporary Chinese Classical Dance are distinctive. In other words, in order to avoid the pitfall of generalizations, rather than addressing questions related to what dance in China might be, my present focus, to reiterate, is concerned with the challenges, obstacles and possibilities that emerged as part of the encounter of practitioners from different places.

What cannot be ignored, however, is the fact that there is already a historical hierarchisation at stake with regard to dance practices/practitioners in China, Taiwan as well as the UK. The latter country inevitably represents a ‘Western’ entity in this project, and there are historical entanglements between the respective countries to consider, with specific power patterns and social and cultural connections, or lack thereof. Britain and China share a colonial past and specifically the Opium War in the 19th century, and the historical and present relations between China and Taiwan remain tense. Stating here that Taiwan calls itself Republic of China is already a controversial issue, since from the perspective of the People’s Republic of China, the island is conceived of as one of their provinces.⁴

While ArtsCross was not a platform for such political issues to be debated explicitly, issues concerning the delineation of different identities in terms of dance cultures were continually negotiated in the project. For instance, questions concerning contemporary trends in dance practice abounded in discussions that formed part of ArtsCross debates: ‘How is it possible to be contemporary in a Chinese way?’ was one of the questions raised in the Beijing edition in 2012. What is Chinese contemporary dance, when tested against Western contemporary dance? Is there a specific identity to dance in Taiwan? The very formulation of these questions entails an affirmation on behalf of Chinese practitioners of Western contemporary dance culture, arguably preceding⁵ a distinct Chinese counterpart.

⁴ See for instance Kwan 2013.

⁵ I have further discussed issues of temporality [in theorization processes of cross-cultural perspectives](#) in Sachsenmaier 2016.

In order to work towards a basic understanding of the variant dance practices involved in the project, in the following I attempt a necessarily brief overview of recent developments in contemporary dance practice in China and Taiwan, assuming that most readers of the present journal are likely to be less familiar with these than with the recent history of contemporary dance in the West, which I will refrain from outlining here for the same reasons.

Jiang Dong, in the publication *Contemporary Chinese Dance* (Jiang 2007), outlines that what is understood in China as 'Contemporary Chinese Dance' emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, when Western artistic influences were received in the country in the arts, as part of which Western ballet as well as modern dance works were performed on Chinese stages (Jiang 2007: 2-3). Prior to this influence, according to Jiang, ancient traditions of Chinese dance had come to stagnation by the end of the nineteenth century and were only alive within the medium of traditional Chinese Opera. The changes involving a revival of dance as an art form as such are directly linked to influences of modern, ballroom and ballet as practised in the West (Jiang 2007: 13). A further crucial period took place in China in the 1950s when, again following Jiang, classical, folk and ballet developed as different types of dance, the latter being developed and institutionalized in the country by Russian teachers and choreographers, and the first Western ballets were performed on Chinese stages at this time (Jiang 2007: 3-5). Jiang pinpoints 1989 as a crucial year in which modern dance was formally imported in Guangdong Province, with the first modern dance company being established with artistic director Willy Tsao (Jiang 2007: 204-205). According to SanSan Kwan, the first independent, non-government-funded, contemporary dance company in China was founded in 1999, by Jin Xing, entitled Jin Xing Dance Theatre, and has since toured internationally (Kwan 2013: xxix).

On the other hand, due to its colonial history with Japan, Taiwan was closely linked for five decades in the early 20th century with Japanese culture. According to Chen Ya-ping, the beginnings of contemporary dance in Taiwan emerged out of this period: 'The Japanized Western creative dance forms – including Duncan-style free dance, neo-romantic ballet, certain aspects of German *Neue Tanz*, and Oriental dance after Denishawn – constituted the foundation of early Taiwanese contemporary dance tradition' (Chen in: Wang and Burrige (eds) 2012: xxiii), with a further influence on Taiwanese dance emerging from Manchuria, a region in the northeast of China, in the middle of the 20th century, due to further historical entanglements. Subsequently, according to Chen, following the end of the period of colonization and its retrocession to China, from 1952 onwards, there was a concern to actively develop *min-zu wu-dao*, or Chinese ethnic or national dance, leading to a hybridization of dance styles that the country is still known for today. In the

decades that followed companies emerged that focused on a blending or fusion of Eastern and Western dance styles, such as the still prominent Cloud Gate Dance Theatre under the direction of Lin Hwai-min (Chen in: Wang and Burrige (eds) 2012: xxiii-xxiv). In the 1980s and 1990s, following Chen, an 'Eastern body aesthetic' emerged in the area of dance, in a quest to 'redefine the relationship between Taiwan and the Western world in choreographic terms', partly also through the encounter with American post-modern dance, which in itself had been influenced by Eastern body-mind practices like yoga or tai chi chuan (Chen in: Wang and Burrige (eds) 2012: xxv). There has been an active engagement with indigenous dance traditions (*min-zu wu-dao*) in Taiwan, which have existed on the island for thousands of years, as well as with ethnic and classical dance forms from mainland China (Chen in: Wang and Burrige (eds) 2012:xxvi-xxvii). Recent trends in Taiwanese contemporary dance might be best understood if we consider that leading Taiwanese choreographers and dance practitioners are well-acquainted with Western dance forms, since many of them have actually studied dance and been professionally active in the US and/or Europe, before returning to their home country where they would actively draw on and cultivate traditional dance forms in a unique style. A well-known example is again the work of the company Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, who have formed a unique training system which encompasses ballet, modern dance techniques as well as techniques drawn from Chinese martial arts and calligraphy (Chen in: Wang and Burrige (eds) 2012: xxviii).

The historical unfoldings broadly described here have concurrently led to the establishing of dance training systems, with the institutions BDA and TNUA playing a representative role. Dancers at BDA as well as at TNUA are currently trained in aspects of Chinese Dance, alongside Western-style ballet and other dance forms. The objective of TNUA is stated as 'educating students across a broad east-west discipline, from traditional to contemporary, encompassing both theory and practice' (TNUA website). Here dance students are trained in technique courses in a seven-year program (three years of high school and four years of undergraduate university study), which includes Eastern Dance, Western Dance and Movement Exploration, with further postgraduate courses available (TNUA website).

Beijing Dance Academy on the other hand is not only heralded as the most prestigious dance school in China, but as a conservatoire it is rated highly worldwide. It has over the past 60 years been guided by the policies of arts and education of the Chinese Communist Party 'operating on principles of ideals, cultures, laws and harmonious development, promoting brilliant tradition of Chinese culture as well as assimilating excellent cultures from abroad', with a focus on the 'renaissance of Chinese culture and development of dance' (BDA website). Dancers from BDA can

opt to study in the departments focusing on Ballet, Chinese Classical Dance, or Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance.

By way of contrast, and with reference once again to sensibility as well as to schooling, the selected dancers from London for ArtsCross were exclusively professionals who were trained in Contemporary Dance amongst other individual variations, plainly without formal knowledge of traditional Chinese dance techniques. The selected dance practitioners from London – both dancers as well as choreographers – represented the multicultural landscape of the city in that they had a wide range of nationalities, yet had been trained and were living and working in the capital.

To return then to one of the key concerns referenced above and that were debated in the exchanges as part of ArtsCross: any question relating to the issue of *what contemporary dance might be* will have to take into consideration the fact that different meanings and connotations attach to the ways specific terms come into the fray.

Choreographic Practice Two –

Bula's Uncertain... Waiting...

I witnessed parts of the creative process of Taiwanese choreographer Bulareyaung Pagarlava in 2011 in Taipei. Bulareyaung worked with seven dancers – six male and one female – all of whom were Taiwanese apart from Tian Yangquzhong, a male dancer from Beijing Dance Academy, who was trained in Chinese Ethnic (Minzu) Dance. The final performance entitled *Uncertain... Waiting...* (corresponding to the theme provided to all choreographers) was exemplary of the creative process in that the choreographer specifically highlighted the individuality⁶ of the dancers. In the first section of the performance, each of the dancers would introduce her- or himself, and comment on their experiences and feelings on dancing in the piece. They would share personal preferences or comment on the process, with one dancer, for instance, stating that 'Bula', as they called the choreographer, had asked each of them to generate forty seconds of material and that she found this very challenging. 'Even until this last day I haven't really decided what I am going to dance' (Tsou Ying-Lin in *Uncertain... Waiting...*, translation by Pei Li). Tian, the dancer from BDA, stated that each day he was not sure what he was doing. He admitted that he does not know much about contemporary dance and had always thought that anybody could do contemporary

⁶ See again Simondon 1989, 2007.

dance. The piece was in a sense framed by the question of what contemporary dance might be, and at the end of the piece, Bulareyaung and Tian had the following public conversation:

Bulareyaung (over the microphone): Tell everybody, have you done contemporary dance before?

Tian (from the stage): I never have. Initially I thought contemporary dance is all about improvisation and that you can do whatever, but now I understand a bit more about it.

(ArtsCross 2011 – translation Pei Li)



Performance *Uncertain... Waiting...* by Bulareyaung Pagarlava, Taipei 2011, Dancers: Chen Tsung-Chiao, Tsou Ying-Lin, Hsu Chih-Hen, Zhang Jian-Zhi, Li Yi-Chi, Huang Yu-Xiang, Tian Yangquzhong, film stills, Andrew Lang.

As in the rehearsal process, in the live performance the choreographer addressed the dancers, talking with them through a microphone. Bulareyaung seemed to have set up a process in which the group would question together what dance might be.

A further section of the performance was set up such that the dancers were waiting in a line, with the front dancer improvising dance moves to a specific number of beats of the music. I witnessed rehearsals of this section several times, always intrigued to watch the dancers struggle but also find what was demanded of them – idiosyncratic movement, something that emerged apparently ‘from them’. The particular group of young dancers seemed to have also established the desire to surprise each other, to be comical, to stand out in some ways.

The work, in contrast to Guo Lei’s choreography, allowed for a certain degree of freedom for the dancers to create material and a degree of reflexivity in giving the dancers space to express what

they feel and think about. Idiosyncratic ways of doing and ways of thinking were highlighted in Bulareyaung's choreographic work.

Issues of translation

In view of the broad historical developments sketched out above, we need to recognize that since the three countries represented also entail three distinct and internally complex histories of dance, the meanings and connotations accruing to key concepts will be far from identical. In theory, what this also suggests is that a 'working together' entails complex issues that need to be negotiated. The terms 'modern' or 'contemporary' dance and respectively the (supposed) Mandarin Chinese equivalent *xiandai wudao* will necessarily hold distinct meanings in the different places concerned. In this context, where cultural 'translations' of all kinds seemed to be central to resolving everyday dilemmas, it seems pertinent to draw on insights from the area of Translation Studies. In the publication *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900 – 1937* Lydia Liu discusses issues concerning the incommensurability of languages. With regard to different conceptions of modernity Liu asks the following: 'what do we mean when we say that the Chinese equivalent of "modernity" or "modern" is *xiandai xing* or *xiandai*? At which moment and in what context does that equivalence or translation become meaningful?' (Liu 1995: xvii). Liu recognizes that comparative perspectives, which are concerned with the crossing of cultures, inevitably deal with issues of translation (Liu, 1995: 1). In her discussion of 'certain entrenched ways of thinking about cultural difference in the Western academy' (Liu, 1995: 1), her writing resonates with established critical agendas relating to the subject of the contested division of East and West and the roles of typically Western anthropologists and ethnographers searching for highly charged distinctions between supposedly dominant and 'other' cultures (Said 1978, 1995; Bhabha 1994). Liu reminds us however of the problematic issue that emerges when criticism of domination of the East by the West reduces the former's agency to victimhood and resistance (Liu, 1995: xv-xvi).

Liu further observes that 'acts of translation' are inextricably tied to the 'performativity of a language' which itself is tied up with historical contingencies, rendered dramatic in current situations. She argues that historical practice will be misconceived if the particular circumstances of its source context are ignored in the present (Liu 1995: xvii):

What does it mean to translate one culture into the language of another on the basis of commonly perceived equivalences? For instance, can we talk, or stop talking, about “modernity” across the East-West divide without subjecting the experience of the one to representations, translations or interpretations by the other? Who fixes and polices the borders between the two? Are the borders easily crossed? Is it possible to have reliable comparative categories on universal or transhistorical grounds? (Liu, 1995: xv)

With regard to the area of cross-cultural studies, with which the project ArtsCross is clearly concerned, acts of translation are inevitable, as Liu further points out (Liu 1995: 1), not only in the verbal conversations that unfolded in the discussions between academic researchers as well as practitioners, but also in the similarly unfolding practices that the performance practitioners revealed to those who observed. But it seems to me that key questions remain: in what ways, and with what degree of success, has the research project ArtsCross facilitated encounters between practitioners and researchers that would provide ground for the development of further, constructive, alternative approaches to exploring differences between different cultures while and through making new work in dance? To what extent are the framing circumstances and the ongoing internal organisation of the event *performative*, in the sense of their being able to bring about changed practices and understandings in the different participants?

Choreographic Practice Three –

Annie Lok's The River

Annie Pui Ling Lok is a choreographer from the UK with a familial heritage from Hong Kong and China, who has a dance as well as visual arts background. Lok created the choreography entitled *The River* as part of the Beijing edition of ArtsCross in 2012, in which she worked with six dancers, five from BDA and one from TNUA. When observing her rehearsals, I was struck by what I perceived as a very warm and relaxed way of relating to the dancers in the discussions she set up. In one of these conversations she provided feedback on a run-through of material that the group had just performed, and Lok asked the dancers to be more ‘natural’, which she qualified as ‘being more themselves’ when performing, as distinct for example from recourse to technical precision from one or another dance tradition. The choreographer put an emphasis on ‘play’ as a way of relating amongst each other on behalf of the dancers. In the feedback I witnessed, Lok asked the dancers whether they were aware that there was ‘less play’ in the run-through they had just

performed. Moreover, she asked the dancers to beware of ‘balletic’ or ‘dancer-like’ walking in and in between the scenes she created with them, since she clearly did not wish such an aesthetic to take hold in the pieces. Instead, the dancers should use the moments of walking ‘to establish something really strong between [themselves]’ (Lok, Authors Rehearsal Notes, 2012).



Rehearsals and Performance *The River* by Annie Lok, Dancers Chen Nan, Feng Zhenqi, Hsiao Anan, Huang Wei, Wang Ke, Zhao Zhibo, Beijing 2012, Film Stills, Andrew Lang.

In the making of this dance piece, Lok set up a concept for the work that would emphasize the individual qualities of each of the six dancers involved, as well as their ways of relating to each other. This, according to the logic that permeated the discussions I witnessed, was not possible if there was a focus on dance technique – this might mean, for example, the dancers being preoccupied with carrying out a specific movement to a standardized ideal, as set up in classical ballet. Lok, I was able to observe, continually emphasized a focus on the relational over such a predefined dance technique in asking the dancers to pay attention to any feelings they experienced in working together. The choreographer set up a frame that would allow for a judgement of what ‘works’ and what ‘does not work’ in the specific choreography she created, and a key preoccupation was with ‘feeling’ while performing. In one instance, she told a dancer: ‘You don’t need to go down so low, just get to where you get to in the time you have’ (Lok, Author’s Rehearsal Notes, 2012). The effort and investment of the dancers was visibly less focused on physical precision, but rather on the quality of the movement performed, rooted in a sense of connection and belonging: ‘We just need time to think and feel it’ (Lok, Author’s Rehearsal Notes, 2012), she repeated, putting the emphasis on the individual dancers’ feeling of the performance material, which I would argue instilled a particular quality of emphasis in the choreographic work. In an organized talk between the choreographers and researchers as part of the project, Lok stated that she welcomed the very precise work of the dancers, and that this gave space for further things to emerge, but that she encountered fewer ‘accidents’, of the sort that emerge when working through improvisation (that is, for some, ‘happy accidents’). This seems to me to

suggest that her dancers were still concerned with a strong degree of precision and with kinaesthetic control.

In place of a conclusion

The work is ongoing, and although I have been able to identify a number of issues that seem to me to have been raised by the ongoing ArtsCross project, and I have drawn on a few sources relating to the history of cultural development and difference pertinent to the make-up of the groups of practitioners brought together by ArtsCross, I want to do no more here than to draw a few points together. The publication entitled *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* by SanSan Kwan seems to me to be an appropriate marker in the present context: in this work the author interrogates issues of Chineseness in relation to cities, both in as well as outside of China, with a particular focus on '[i]ndividual bodies, larger social contexts, and expressive cultures are intertwined processes' and how they are 'in motion' (Kwan 2013: xiii). Kwan proposes that 'Chineseness is a plural, contested, yet persistent idea' (Kwan 2013: 16). In my view Lok, who worked exclusively with dancers who had emerged from a distinctly different dance training background from her own in the UK, but whose own familial history granted her a particular sympathy with those Asian dancers she worked with, was able to develop creative processes that unavoidably raised issues of identity and inherited tradition that in turn were of keen interest to her as a UK choreographer. In my view, as a privileged observer of her processes, Lok set up a concern in her creative process with something Kwan refers to regarding the relationship between bodies and space. Citing the work of José Gil (2006), Kwan notes that when moving, a dancer simultaneously 'watches herself' from a distance while feeling the motion internally; while dancers who work in groups, Kwan adds, draw on an 'ability to feel each other' (Kwan 2013: 8). In other words, the focus on individuality and feeling, in Lok's work, seems to have allowed the dancers trained in Asian traditions to experience a distinct relational set-up, a new way of knowing and doing that – in the most optimistic of terms – will lead to a shift in individual sensibility. A confrontation with something 'new' is mirrored in the experiences of dancers Katie Cambridge and Tiang Yangzuzhong, as described in the Choreographic Practice sections above, in that both practitioners were challenged to embrace new ways of working and moving. Crucially, this ArtsCross event of research creation, in Manning's words (Manning 2016) has permitted the emergence of a range of exploratory negotiations and relational set-ups that, at a time yet to be determined, may well transform the ways dance work is made, and the sorts of

ways questions regarding the contemporary in dance are addressed, in Taiwan and China, as well as in the United Kingdom.

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