

ABSTRACT

Title of document: A WORLD APART, A HEARTBEAT AWAY.

Xuejuan Feng, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

Thesis Directed by: Professor Karen Bradley, Department of Dance

When I first came to the U.S. from China, I felt mute and deaf, unable to communicate through the opaque language barrier enveloping me. But with the loss of speech, came the crystallization of other perceived sensations and realizations. Though many ideological differences exist between American and Chinese culture, none became clearer to me than the unspoken ideals of feminine beauty and aesthetics.

Like a first language, one's sense of the femininity is consciously and subconsciously shaped by one's environment and culture from an early age, manifesting into one's way of speech, thought and movement. At first, immersed in the U.S. aesthetics, I'd never felt further from home. But the longer I find myself in this country, the more my viewpoint changes of what feminine beauty is and should be.

A WORLD APART, A HEARTBEAT AWAY.

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2013

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Introduction

My M. F. A. thesis project explores the different ideals of feminine aesthetic between China and America through the lens of my own identity and experiences of transition. This idea came to me over a course of time and is an aggregation of my own first-hand dance experiences. Like a first language, one's sense of the ideal feminine aesthetic is embedded in one's conscious and subconscious mind as one grows up, influenced by culture and environment. It manifests, with and without thought, in movement, speech, and thought.

Since starting my studies in the U.S., I have noticed, in myself, my peers, and my students, many differences in movement quality that I believe result from this inner sense of culturally-constructed aestheticism. Broadly categorized, I thought my own movements tended to be more reserved, implicit, delicate and introspective; many small details planned, finely tuned, and exactly placed. I had difficulty mirroring my peers, especially in American dance, which to me seems very flamboyant, powerful, direct, and open. When I started teaching Chinese folk dance at University of Maryland, I observed a similar difference in my students. Specifically, those who were born and raised in the U.S. and those who were born and spent a part of their life in China, danced the same movements I described very differently. As a female, Chinese artist in the U.S., I became interested in reconciling these differences in terms of the feminine aesthetics that I know and the ones that I observed every day.

In my thesis, through first person, third person, and group movement, I explore instances of feminine ideals that are intimately familiar to me. Among my movement themes, I use the body ideal of foot binding, an ancient Chinese tradition that is renowned yet infamous and disturbingly similar to modern foot fashions that women, including myself, submit themselves to everyday in the pursuit of beauty. I use mobile mirrors to show the dichotomous aesthetic ideals that I experience myself every day, as I transition between two cultures. And I work with in accepted ideals of behavior for the female archetype in both cultures through the use of space, contrasting the admired characteristics of outright strength, power, and directness in modern American woman against the unspoken expectation of gentility, reservation, and feminine delicacy in Chinese women. Across all these themes, I inject an additional layer of personal perspective; using sound and speech I reconstruct for the audience the initial feelings of confusion and displacement that I experienced when I first came to the U.S., placing them in the shoes in which I first experienced the differences in Eastern and Western feminine aesthetic.

Choreographic Development

Around this time last year 2012, I started my thesis project with only a rough idea that I wanted to use my personal experiences of Chinese and American cultural as a focal point. There are so many similarities and differences between these two countries - lifestyle, social consciousness, traditions, and values – that the topic was both interesting and troubling to me at the same time. It was so broad that I could not find where to start, much less how I could translate so many non-dance topics into movement. How could I frame such a broad interest into a concise research topic? This was my biggest hurdle at the start of my first foray into dance research.

I read several books about the theory of choreography during my studies at University of Maryland. One book, *Researching Dance*, in particular talked about dance research that focuses on ideas designed to stimulate thinking about the critical process and how it works (Fraleigh, Sondra Horton, and Hanstein, Penelope). It enlightened to me that dance is the practice of previous theories and theory comes from practice. These readings pushed me to observe my own work and choreographic process from new, objective perspectives. In particular, the feedback loop advocated by many texts has become any integral part of my choreographic and creative process.

With guidance from my committee members, Karen Kohn Bradley, Alvin Mayes, and Sara Pearson, I began to whittle my interest into a cohesive vision. I started with a single point of interest that I could easily translate into physical movement – physical aesthetic – and expanded from there. Specifically, I focused on feet aesthetics, which represented a

very traditional Chinese viewpoint to me but also drew in current Western foot fashions. Gradually, this theme developed into whole body aesthetics and then into movement quality (subtle vs. direct) bound by these aesthetics. This development, so easily summarized within a sentence, took a painstakingly long time to realize as it required a continuous cycle of exploration, realization, feedback, and modification in choreography. For example, one of the ideas that began to take shape halfway through my exploration of the feet aesthetics theme was the concept that a movement can be done with different forces or tempo to represent socially accepted and expected behaviors. Alternating between choreography, viewings, and faculty discussions, I began to tie the physical binding of feet to the resulting act of walking. This evolved from a natural walk into a style walk taken a thematic dance step that incorporated a rolling twist step, the three curves of the body and finally, accompanying arm movements. This thematic dance step was very reminiscent of traditional Chinese folk dance themes and silhouettes, which in turn made me think of other walking dance steps representative of feminine beauty along these lines. Once, I started down this path of exploring the physical act of walking, I realized there were many differences in walking styles, both mundane and dance-oriented, that I could incorporate to show Chinese and American female archetypes. This evolution took place over the course of many weeks, during which I was constantly guided by the feedback from my peers and professors. Many iterations of this exploration similar to this one conglomerated into my final thesis concert.

Part of this exploration took place in class, as part of homework or in class improvisation. This individual work took place early and gave me the substance and confidence to start working with my dancers in spring of 2012.

With my dancers, my thesis themes began to evolve in new directions. Abstractly, I had always thought I would use group pieces to show contrast between Chinese and American dance aesthetics. I had envisioned capturing both Chinese dance and American Modern Dance on the same stage to show their differences most clearly. However, during the choreographic process, I found this idea to be more of a burden than a direction. Sara's feedback then, which I realized to be invaluable, was to follow where my choreography takes me rather than sticking stubbornly to an idea. I discovered I preferred smooth and slow transitions and separate Chinese and American Modern Dance segments; and that lengthy movements preserved in memory could be as ripe for comparison as simultaneously snapshots of silhouettes. By taking away the constraint, I found the individual segments were stronger, more cohesive because they followed a single theme of one cultural aesthetic. I was able to incorporate foot binding, S-curves, hand gestures, comparisons between large and small movements, and comparisons between delicate and open movements smoothly within the segments in a clear narrative that the audience should be able to recognize and remember.

As the segments took shape, their beginnings and endings naturally crystallized. The next hurdle that arose was the task of bringing the separate segments I had been working on together into a single narrative. Here, ordering became important as each section could

have stood on their own as an individual dance but they needed to come together to act as introduction for following sections and conclusion for preceding ones. I played with the order of the sections in different ways and eventually came upon the idea of drawing upon my own personal experiences to order the segments. The final ordering I chose retells for me my transition to the United States.

Section One: Trio

The first section of my thesis work is the trio dance, performed by Shuo Chen, Michelle Chia, and me. This section starts with and revolves around two mobile mirrors travelling about the stage. I stand between them, sometimes aware of them, sometimes not. This section for me speaks of the two independent cultures, in which I reside, and their complete detachment from me. The other two dancers start off hidden from view behind the mirrors, moving them, symbolizing the way I saw the world rotating about its axis independent and unaware of my presence.

I had a lot of fun discovering the creative space in this segment. Mirrors by themselves are two-dimensional planes but they add numerous compartments and surfaces through reflection and physical presence. While choreographing this section, I clearly remember thinking of the dance “Sarabande” choreographed by Jiri Kylian for the Nederland Dans Theatre, in which three dancers used the edge of the stage curtain in their dance (“Sarabande”). This dance video inspired me to use the edge of the mirror frame in my choreography. Using my hands to hold the edge of the mirror, I lent a three-dimensional presence to the mirrors so it became more than an inanimate object. When body movements connect with the mirrors, they become three-dimensional and reflect to

different angles. For example, when the orientation of the mirror changes from parallel to the audience to perpendicular, the dancers' movements captured and reflected multifold between them change significance.



Figure 1: Trio – two independent cultures

Additionally, the mirrors infused interpretations into choreography simply through placement. The other two dancers start hidden behind them, adding mystery and curiosity; thus when they first become visible to the audience, their movements which are visible for the first time take on greater significance. In one section, I show only the graceful movement of their arms to illustrate how feminine a simple hand can be. In another, I show only their leg and first introduce the theme of feet aesthetics into the dance. Through tendus and développés, they show the grace of the leg and the beauty in the natural arch of the foot, which is particularly emphasized in modern footwear such as high heels.

With so much activity already taking place, between the mirrors and the other dancers, I wanted to keep my movement simple but still dynamic. So I stay in one spot, in stasis to their movement. Despite the confined space, I try to capture the audience's attention as well in small, fine movements. Through the differing use of spaces, I want to show the large spaces of modern dance versus the smaller spaces of Chinese dance.

I choreographed very different movement for the two dancers behind the mirror – one travels with small, fast, delicate steps, her bearing contained and timid while the other moves through space as though she owned it. Their revolution around me signifies the two cultures coexisting around me. When the two dancers go back to their semi-concealed positions behind the hung fabrics, their image is obscured but not their essence. Despite concealing their facial expressions and flattening their physical forms to shadow on a sheet of fabric, the audience is still able to see their silhouette and feel the personalities they portray – sometimes reserved, introspective, and delicate and sometimes direct, strong, and open. I think the shadow-play draws more upon the audience's own imagination; all the input does not have to come from my choreography and the dancers, instead some of it must be introduced by the audience's own imagination and interpretation of the shadows they see. I think this engages and encourages participation from the audience, albeit in a very dormant form.

The effect of the fabric had an added benefit of appearing like a black and white film. It is old fashioned but does not feel out of place in my piece since my thesis distorts time, flattening it to compare old and modern aesthetics simultaneously.

Section Two: Solo

The second section of my thesis is the solo dance. I introduce a thematic movement first then perform an initial movement series that signifies my learning experiences in China; this is followed by a section showing how these initial gestures evolve into a more modern theme, mirroring my transition between China and the U.S.

I begin on the floor, with very tiny foot movements to draw the audience's attention to my feet. This is a very explicit portrayal of the ideal of beauty in China over 100 years ago. In that time, people believe women's tiny wrapped feet were exquisite and the embodiment of ladylike beauty. A woman who did not follow this convention was scorned by the populace and could not marry. I imagine many women were forced into this tradition subconsciously by the pressure of society, if not by outspoken edict. I try to convey this sentiment in my dancing, as though I am bound not just by physical trappings on my feet but also mental and societal chains.

The lighting design helps contribute to this effect by providing illumination to only a small section of the stage, effectively boxing me in and dramatically shrinking the space in which I can move freely. Much of the remaining choreography took shape intuitively. I worked on the floor, moving about using my hands and my knees, until I felt it was time to stand. The transition in space was slow, gradual. Sometimes the movement took shape and dictated the use of space but once the space changed, this in turn changed the movement that had given access to it. I explored using curves of the body through this transition. Given my topic, I wanted to highlight the female body's characteristics so I

tried to rotate my head, twist my shoulder, and emphasize the upper body and waist in the process.



Figure 2: Solo – portrayal of the ideal of beauty of wrapped feet

After standing up from the floor and facing the mirror, there is a shift in spatial and temporal awareness. I stop embodying the ideal of a woman and become myself. I see the double of myself in the mirror and when I slowly extend my right arm back toward the audience, I am asking them to see as well. This is an exchange between dancer and audience.

Section Three: First Quartet

The third section of my thesis is the first quartet I choreographed. The dancers in it are Nava Behnam Shabahang, Shanna Lim, Shuo Chen, and Michelle Chia. This section embodies the Chinese feminine aesthetic that I recognize the most in myself and my home country.



Figure 3: First Quartet – capturing reserve, reticence, delicacy, and introspection

Most notable in this section is the use of black silk fabrics, which I introduced to complement the movements in the dance and in turned inspired the projected animation that was created to accompany the dance. The fabrics add a flowing quality to the dance that helps characterize the Chinese culture and female aesthetic. It is supple and delicate, light and flowing, as a woman is expected to be. It is also reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy and ink paintings, which embody the epitome of artistic elegance and beauty in Chinese culture. The black silk material and the animation paired well because they share the same gentle lines, elegant and mysterious.

Movement-wise, I began the choreography by isolating some signature Chinese dance elements for use in the dance. These movements I chose because they seemed the most representative of the personality I wanted to portray - reserved, delicate and introspective. The movements included specifically the subtle S-curves of the body often shown in

silhouette, a rolling twist in the legs and small, butterfly-like steps. From these core signatures, I built outward, incorporating transitions and choreography as it came to me.

Additionally, I worked with the silks in studio every week to discover new movements. I wanted the fabric to be an integral part of the dance, not just a decoration or accessory. I started with some pretty standard movements, such as swishing the silk from left to right, up and down. And in the process, I found new dimensions to the fabric. It did not always have to be smooth and flowing. It could also show tension through jitteriness, repression in stillness and size, and freedom in flight.

Both the use of the fabric and the movement vocabulary gave me a good starting point for this section. But within a couple of weeks into rehearsal, I realized that capturing the reserve, reticence, and delicacy of the Chinese feminine aesthetic was not enough. Although I was able to embody the characteristics I had already envisioned, I found the section, even incomplete as it was, to be too sluggish. The rhythm was too slow and the pacing too uniform. While it might catch the audience's attention in the fine details, the section would not be able to retain their attention for prolonged periods. Eventually the viewer would be fatigued and lose interest.

In studying the movement, I realized that many of the movements had an innate rhythmic inclination, based on its form, its lines, and the dancers' own breath. Without music, I observed and noted these inclinations and incorporated them with some of my own injections into the movement. This decision added new depth to the piece with the variations in slow, medium, and fast pacing adding subtlety and emphasis to the

movement. For example, in one part where the four dancers sit cross-legged on the floor, fluidly shifting their upper bodies through space, I added a quick turn of the wrist and a sudden weight shift into a pose that emphasized their shoulder, chin, and cheek. The injection of this adroit, sharp change to a well-defined silhouette in the middle of their previously mesmerizing undulation is like a drop of water breaking the serene surface of a bowl of water; it is startling and refreshing to the eye. At the same time, the movement remains close to the reticent, calm characteristic of the entire section.

Another example is the movement of the dancers through the entire stage space using small, butterfly-like steps. The music for this small segment is fast, driven; and the dancers' feet, moving in rapid, fluttering unison, match this feeling. However everything else about them, from their knees up, to the path that they draw on the stage is fluid, graceful, and serene. There is agitation under the surface but you did not look beyond their exterior.

Because a large part of this section occurs on the ground, with the dancers remaining mostly stationary from the waist down, I thought their formation would be very rigid and not easy to change. To account for this, I tried to use different planes of space in the torso movement. At the ground level, I employed curved, spiral, horizontal, and vertical lines as well as square, circular, and triangular planes. Although dance can be thought of as a physical interpretation of a series of dynamic images that change constantly in location and space, it can also be thought of a tool that occupies spaces, feeling it, building it, and describing it. In my effort to carve space into different interpretations, without physically

moving the location of my dancers, I tried to communicate a sense of three dimensional space using just their torso, arms, shoulders, neck, and head. Simultaneously, I associated different emotions with the curvature of space because a curved line and straight line can be interpreted very differently.

Several of the dance videos I watched as a part of the research process gave me insight during the development process. Among these is Sankai Juku, an entrant in the MCA Global Stage series, in which the choreographer used many abstract, strange movements (“Sankai Juku part of MCA Global Stage series”). Although the movements were very slow and small, I could still associate them with a strong sense of emotion and they seemed to occupy a space larger than the stage they were on. From this, I deduced that it doesn’t just have to be a physical space that I choreograph to but also a mental space or what the audience feels is there. Another memorable video was “落花,” translated as “the falling flower,” a Chinese dance, in which I observed many implicit, light and reserved movements representative of the style (“古典舞 落花”). When the dancer’s steps carried her from one side of the room to another, she used small, subtle steps far removed from the natural walk often seen in Modern Dance.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the meaning of the dance was very much dependent on the understanding and interpretation of my dancers. Each of these four dancers came from very different dance backgrounds: Nava came from a modern background, Shanna from a hip-hop and contemporary background, Shuo from a ballet background, and Michelle from a Chinese drama and modern background. They had to

feel and understand each other within the context of my choreography in order to draw the dance together. Furthermore, they had to have the same image of what this dance portion should look like and feel like in order to be together.

In order to get them used to Chinese dance, and its philosophy of “circular, curved, inner breathing,” I began early on in our rehearsals together to tell them of my dance experiences in China; mini show-and-tell sessions to help them imagine how Chinese dance came about and is still taught today. In particular, I emphasized breathing and detail in every part of the body; in a single movement, everything from the tension in the fingertips to the direction of the eye, can be exactly defined in Chinese dance. When they practiced together, I asked them to imagine the emotions and expression of a Chinese woman. Finally, I asked them to think as much about what is going on within their bodies as what is going on outside it; Chinese dance has deep roots in Tai Chi which focuses on the body’s inner rhythm, balance, and peace.

Mancheng Tang, a professor at the Beijing Dance Academy once said that the material characteristics of Chinese dance lies not only in the body’s movements and synchrony with musical rhythm but also with the dancer’s sense of self and understanding of the internal.

Section Four: Duet

The fourth section of my thesis is the duet dance, performed by Michelle and me. Often, when people think or talk about a duet, there is a connotation of physical contact or

identical unison. But I think this is a mistaken impression that broadly disregards other forms of duet choreography that could be equally compelling and cohesive.

The purpose of this section in my dance was to distinguish Chinese feminine aesthetics from American and show the allure within each. Throughout the dance, there is never any physical contact between Michelle and I nor any identical movement shared between us however, we remain connected. The idea was to show that we are inseparable because we are two halves of a single person and our movements are intrinsically linked without touch. I thought, experimented, and practiced this section for a long time to arrive at this conclusion and purpose.



Figure 4: Duet – intrinsically linked without touch

Instinctively, I brought back the mobile mirrors to simultaneously separate us and illustrate the duality of self. Michelle and I represent two different aspects of me as they exist in two different countries and cultures. The mirror acts as a barrier that both

separates and connects us, compares and contrasts us. For example, Michelle and I do many movements rooted in the same meaning however mine are reticent and introspective while hers are candid and flamboyant; these movements side by side show their identical roots but also emphasize their differences in actualization. In the duet part, I create several focal points of contrast: bound feet versus high heels, implicit movements versus powerful movements, contemplation versus action, reticence versus forthrightness, body awareness versus inhibition. I wanted to use mirror reflections to show similarity but also use the two dancers to show difference.

Section Five: Second Quartet

The final phase of my thesis is primarily a quartet performed by Nava, Shanna, Shuo, and Michelle; in the final seconds, I join in. For me, this section embodies the Western feminine aesthetic. Having worked on my thesis for over a year by the time I started it, I knew that as a choreographer I had to have a better, clearer idea of every movement, expectation and instruction than any of my dancers before I handed it over to them. After working on the first quartet with so many small, fine details, I felt that if I could not clearly articulate my vision through direction, my dancers would not be able to show theirs. However, this piece was a pleasant surprise. Perhaps because it was meant to show the Western aesthetic, and the choreography that represented it was more based in modern dance, which flows in broad, vibrant, defiant strokes. As such, there were not so many fine details to be picked over during rehearsal. Furthermore, at this point in the rehearsal year, my dancers had gotten to know me well and had a good sense of my dance style.

In this part, I brought back the black silk fabrics that had previously been used in the other quartet, to connect the two quartets. I also brought back animation, although this time it was projected on the stage floor. The dancers start the piece by dropping the black silk and stepping on them. This was a very obvious reference to the fact that I was now moving the choreography beyond the confines of the reserved, introspective, and delicate woman. In contrast to the small, quick, delicate, and simultaneously identical movements of the previous quartet, this quartet allowed each dancer to show their unique personalities. Although they still often had the same movement, with very little variation between dancers, there were other ways of showing this individuality. They were lit in different ways, their space of movement expanded at different rates, they used different parts of space, and everyone had different intensity of expression. This variation came from the western ideal valuing a woman's fearless individuality and independence. Though women may still have the same physical form here, they seem stronger here, more daring, and with better endurance.



Figure 5: Second Quartet – capturing flamboyance, power, and candor

To gather the ideas I wanted to portray in this section, I relied on a lot of visual media, interviews, and informal discussions with others to get a sense of women in American culture. One innocuous resource that proved particularly useful was a YouTube video called ADF school orientation (“ADF School Orientation”). It showed a group of girls talking together. Usually manners of behavior are the reflection of a person’s mental condition. Posture shows a measure of a person’s psychology. Facial expressions and gestures constitute an important part of the external image of a person. I saw many forms of unspoken interaction through gesture from this video. Even without hearing what they said, I got a sense of their conversation from their hand movements, shrugging shoulders and upper body postures. This expressiveness of their bodies in something as casual as everyday conversation was something I do not usually see in Chinese women. I sought to exaggerate or repeat these body gestures in choreography to highlight the characteristics of the American personality in dance.

In my exploration, I also watched many dance videos of Chinese dance and Modern dance. I had already known that space was something I wanted to use to contrast between the two quartets since it had been a consideration in the first quartet. I want to use it again here in this section to augment emotion. In the modern dance videos I watched, I saw many streamlined movements that used a lot of space so I endeavored to utilize all the stage space in this section.

Feedback

Feedback has been an integral part in every stage of my creative process. I was fortunate to receive insightful and incisive suggestions from faculty and friends alike.

Through in class feedback, early on in my choreographic process, I was able to refine the duet section and find the direction I wanted to move in. I learned that though audiences could see the parallels between the two dancers, the different aesthetic features between Chinese and American, which they represented, were not obvious. These criticisms from my peers helped me make these distinctions more clear. Later, in the class, after a second showing, they affirmed the clarity of the choreography's objective and gave me more confidence to move forward.

Also as a result of feedback, I discovered both movement and non-movement ways of showing my themes. In particular, after a discussion with some of my Chinese dance students, I thought of using text to connect and transition between sections of my dance. Chinese calligraphy is a beautiful art form, well recognized for its elegance and beauty, and it called directly to my heritage. This idea steadily developed until it was realized in the animation complementing the first quartet.

Professor Alvin Mayes was a significant contributor to the development of my solo. Over the course of multiple showings, he gave me a number of brilliant suggestions, including the use of light to restrict space and complement the theme of binding in the dance. It was a beautiful idea and demonstrated to great effect on stage. Also, he helped add several

movement details that I had overlooked in my choreography. I tend to choreograph in smooth, well defined movements but he suggested the addition of a display of effort and struggle during the floor section because it would clarify the emotion of this section. As a result I added more use of the arms during my struggle to sit up and stand which drew attention to the phantom immobility of my feet and portrayed the desire to be free. Also, later in my dancing, once I stood up, he pointed out that the emphasis on my feet tended to waver and fluctuate. This was an oversight that had not occurred to me. From the floor transition to standing and afterwards, my feet needed to consistently continue to be a focus so I paid attention to how my feet made contact with the ground every time and the effort at each contact. I noticed that when I did choreographed walks, both the slow, awkward steps and the smooth, natural steps, I focused on my feet but in the transitions I lost this focus. This omission was important to realize and fix. And finally, Alvin has helped me smooth the lines, sharpen the directions, and fine tune the mood throughout the entire dance.

Professor Sara Pearson was a tremendous help during the development of the first quartet. When I first started working on this section, I wanted to have both traditional Chinese and Modern Dance in the same section. After a couple of weeks of rehearsal, I had a significant portion of Chinese influenced choreography but had not yet come up with the modern section and was a bit stumped as to how to move forward into a transition. Sara and Patrik Widrig came to view what I had a choreographed so far and helped me realize that my preset idea was an unnecessary restriction and burden. They advised me to let the choreography flow and see where it takes me. This advice was

brilliant! The first quartet came rapidly together and once I had exhausted my vision in that section, the modern choreography came. In addition, Sara gave me some very constructive feedback about putting together the pieces. When I was choreographing each section, dancers stood front and center and did not rely on any of the other sections. As such, they were very independent of each other but all were derived from the same theme of feminine aestheticism. Because every dance section has its own soundtrack and mood, I was worried that they would not meld together well. After watching our second showing, Sara said that each section was very strong on its own but also confirmed that there were some uneasy transitions, especially between the duet and quartet two; she suggested that I use sound, in particular the chiming of the bells, to link them. It would have the added benefit of cueing my dancers. I implemented this idea to great effect and the chimes became a recurring theme throughout all five sections.

Both Karen Bradley and Sara Pearson noted in their feedback that my dancers' emotions were flat on multiple occasions. They suggested giving the dancers some instruction or constructive images that would enable them to better derive an emotion from the movement. Because so much detail is in the choreography, their focus seemed to concentrate on getting the movement rather than the personality behind the movement. Based on Karen and Sara's suggestion, I sat down with them almost weekly to talk informally about Chinese culture, history, our respective backgrounds, dance, body language, and female ideals and archetypes. These discussions were rich because everyone had something to contribute from their own experiences. For example, I once brought up the question of how a shy person would behave in conversation. How could

you tell instinctively that they were shy? They responded that it would show in the eyes, in the tilt of the head, the posture of the shoulders and back, maybe in the direction of the face and the extent of facial expression. Pointing these out, they themselves became more aware of these parts of their own body during the movement. In extension, we did the same exercise for someone who was innately confidence and assertive. This gave them an idea of the emotion to show during the two quartets.

The Collaborative Process: Sound, Light, Set, Animation,

Costume

Sound Design

Finding and creating audio that worked with my ideas and movements was very difficult. The music that I imagined evoked the charm of Chinese music, deft and intuitive, mysterious and mercurial, and simultaneously portrayed the passion of Western music, which could seize an audience by its ears and not let go. To me, music and dance are very integrated. Music during a dance expresses emotion, reflecting the dancers' personalities and magnifying it; but only if it is well matched to the movement. As a result, I worked on my thesis audio throughout the year that I choreographed.

The first section, the trio, starts with only white noise – traffic sounds and indistinct speakers speaking in a foreign language. Use of this type of accompaniment was a great departure for me as I had only used music before. Use of this kind of auditory accompaniment lends a very different aesthetic awareness in the auditory domain. Sounds can act as a distinct signature to a country or culture but it can also be used to illustrate my feelings or state of mind about my environment. I deliberately created an ambient noise track that few in the audience will understand. When I first came to the US, not knowing a single word of English, speech was just noise to me. It is an unsettling feeling to not be able to do something that everyone around you does as naturally as breathing. So this was a feeling that I wanted to convey in my dance through sound.

The second and fourth sections, the solo and the duet, were both accompanied by music from Liping Yang's repertoire. The solo music came from her dance "Unknown" on YouTube ("Yang LiPing Unknown Solo"). The duet music came from her dance "Spring" ("Original Ecology Dance <<Spring>> 雙人舞: 楊麗萍&小彩旗《春》"). Liping Yang is a famous artist in China, with an expansive repertoire of ethnic folk dances, and I have followed her work for years. As soon as I saw, or more importantly, heard these two dances, I knew they contained the music I had been looking for. The music filled me with a sense of mystery and wonder. I came across the music for my solo first during my second year at University of Maryland and used it while choreographing my solo. Halfway through the semester, my fellow students introduced me to a new song that sounded very similar to the one I had been using; a soundtrack recording from the movie, *The Godfather*. It came so strongly recommended by several respected sources that I seriously considered changing my music. There were many similarities between the two songs so it was feasible to switch despite the progress of the choreography to the first song. On first listen, these two songs sounded very similar in style, meandering and melodic. However, the more I contemplated changing, the more differences I found between the two. My original soundtrack had many nuances and flowed in linear fashion, whereas *The Godfather* soundtrack, while also strongly melodic, had a noticeable percussive accompaniment that was strongly reminiscent of early 20th century Italian American music. Furthermore, I worried that the inherent association of the soundtrack with the movie would detract from the story of my thesis, which was rooted in Chinese culture. I deliberated for several months, alternating between the two songs in rehearsal, but in the end I went with my first choice because I realized a deep-seated connection

with it that I could not find with the second choice. Liping's music spoke to me; it fed my movement and gave my body greater depth of expression.

The third section, the Chinese inspired quartet, was accompanied by Tan Dun's the map 7_9 stone drums, a percussive creation using stones, drums, and water. Tan Dun's musical concept is the integration of many different styles of music, from different cultures and eras. He uses Western symphonic instruments to alter and modernize classical Chinese scores. Furthermore, he often uses natural instruments alongside ancient instruments, such as stones, paper bushels, to introduce ingenious new sounds to his compositions. The combination of all these different efforts lend incredible depth and appeal to his music. I feel inherently connected to his compositions because they relate so well to my own dance goals. His stone drums and cymbals spurred my imaginations. The sounds had the flavor of Chinese music in its silvery tones and gentle, flowing rhythm, but it also had a portion strongly devoted to the strength and momentum of the Western symphony. When I first heard this soundtrack, so many questions took shape in my head. The sound of a pebble falling or bouncing is so mundane a sound that we would hardly take notice of in our daily lives yet here it is melodic, interesting, and tantalizing; what would such a mundane yet interesting soundtrack draw from the audience? What kind of movement would mix well with the simultaneous flowing and staccato quality of the music? I resolved I would have to find out by using it in my thesis and I am very glad I chose it.

The final section, the Western quartet, was probably the hardest for me to find music for. The others had all come relatively easily; I had known immediately when I heard them that they were what I needed to complement my choreography. For the final quartet, choreography was well underway even before I could imagine what I wanted to do with the audio. It took several months of mulling and searching, all without definitive results. But amazing things happen when you least expect them and I stumbled into the music without realizing what I wanted. While attending the American Dance Festival in July of 2012, I attended a performance by Chicago Hubbard Street Dance Company and came across the artist, Ori Lichtik. The music was very modern and very different from anything I had used in previous sections but I realized that is what I needed – a departure from what the audience had gotten used to. The driving rhythm, bone rattling bass, and unapologetic, explicit vocalizations of Ori Lichtik's *Nu* that is a song were a wonderful fit. *Nu* gave me a rush of strength and emotion the first time I heard it. I decided to bring back the chimes from the previous sections and then added cuts from Ori Lichtik's *Nu*. I reused the chimes because they helped connect the section to its predecessors. At the same time, they are a sound of remembrance for me, like the tolling of a bell at a funeral. They are quiet and harmonious, reminiscent of things past, traditions foregone, and life experienced. During the chimes, I wanted the audience to relax; feel their heart beating; and hear their own breathing. Then I wanted to jolt them awake and incite their emotions, their passion, and their hearts. When I played the compilation for my dancers, I saw their immediate connection to it in their movement the very first time they heard it. I knew there and then that I had found the right music for my final section and I never looked back.

Light and Set

Early on in choreography, I had already talked to Douglas Clarke about set design. Knowing I wanted to use black silks and ink in my choreography and animation, respectively, we decided to use white marley and curtains on the stage. Against white background, I imagined my dancers would look like they were painting on white canvas with their black silks and dark costumes. Also, the white made it easier for projection and animation on all surfaces.

A very important part of my choreography revolved around mobile mirrors and I put all my trust in the hands of Douglas to come up with something that would work. What he created exceeded my greatest expectations. He created custom frames out of steel columns and mounted them on wheels so they could easily move. He used flexible mirror paper to create the mirror effect. Finally he aged the paper and added intricate Chinese style cornices to the frames. Finished, they looked like they had been taken from a museum in the Forbidden City. The design was light and sturdy so my dancers could easily move them about the stage but it was also aesthetically beautiful and complemented the thesis theme beautifully.

In addition to Douglas, I also worked with Rob Denton on lighting design. I wanted it to shape the impression of the audience, render color, and emphasize theme changes using lighting. It needed to be a part of the visual vocabulary and help in defining the space of the movement. Originally I pictured using white and gray lights for vertical lines, creating a cross-cross design projected onto the floor. Also, I thought of using lighting to

show cultural ideals in physical skin color – Americans value tanned skin for it boasts of good health and vitality whereas Chinese prize pale skin, especially in women, because it shows refinement and delicacy. I spoke of all these ideas with Rob at our first meeting and he gave some terrific feedback.

In particular, Rob suggested using a single large circular light during the duet that encompassed both Michelle and me and then adding partitioned color filters on the lights to emphasize the separation between us. After he showed me the light model, I was thrilled. Also, he was concerned about the use of mirrors during the first section for it was very possible that the mirrors would reflect the lighting into the audience's eyes. He modeled multiple lighting schemes for me to look at and we finally settled on a wood paneling picture projected onto the actual floor of the stage. The lighting made the stage look like a dance studio to me and I thought it was a fitting reference to where I first started noticing the differences between feminine ideals.

Another part that required special lighting was the silhouette section in the trio. For this part, I needed the audience to see the entire body silhouettes of both Michelle and Shuo. To realize this, Douglas and Rob collaborated with me in unrolling scrolls of long white fabric of different widths from the ceiling to the stage floor. The cloth was just broad enough to cover the bodies of my dancers but the lights behind them had to be specially placed to catch the entire silhouette of their bodies without distorting any significant portion. I was very happy with the final effect we achieved with the projections as they magnified the dancers' silhouettes, emphasizing the sleekness and sinuousness of their

lines, and also occupied vertical height that I could not have achieved otherwise with just physical bodies.

Animation

For the animation design, I worked with graphic artist, Boyang Ma. Because he lived in upstate New York, all our collaboration was done remotely, over email, phone, and chat. But the distance, his vision and mine were harmonically realized and I could not have asked for a better collaborator and visionary.

For my animation, I decided to use the imagery of ink in water to invoke Chinese calligraphy as a visual counterpart to the first quartet's movement. This choice may seem incongruous with the theme of feminine ideals and aestheticism but I believe there is inherent connection between this art form and femininity. Chinese penmanship is intimately related to and deeply seated in culture, philosophy, and aesthetic. Each stroke of every word has meaning. And it remains a revered and much appreciated art form. Chinese people commonly see penmanship as another form of "painting"; there is beauty in the curve of the lines, the width and length of each stroke and the balance of all the strokes as a whole. It is an abstract art. But the characteristics and criteria by which this art form is judged and measured are very similar to those applied to a woman's physical form.

The pictograms of Chinese have changed throughout China's history but calligraphers continue to preserve styles of writing from each century, dynasty, and age. The major writing styles remain and are still practiced today: Da Hao, Xiao Hao, Li Shu, Kai Shu,

Hang Kai, Xing Shu, Xing Cao, Cao Shu and Da Cao. Each writing style of penmanship is a product of different historical periods. I chose to use Xing Shu, which developed during the Han dynasty circa 100 A.D., in my animation video (“xingshu”). It has simple lines. This kind of writing style can show lively, smooth, and soft lines, much like a woman’s form.

I had originally thought to also use English writing as a complement to the Chinese calligraphy. Also, I felt English penmanship reflected the evolution of American culture in a different direction from China’s own evolution. Old English texts are beautifully crafted with flowing, flourishing letters and fantastic embellishments but much of that is not seen any more today in the U.S. Very few schools still teach cursive handwriting and as computers and phones replace books, fewer people value the beauty of the written word. There is no weight on the aesthetic structure of the written word. English letters, for most people, only represent a means of communication.

I thought to use this difference with regard to the written word to parallel the female aesthetic. Chinese culture continues to preserve tradition and origins, no matter how old or outdated. It finds value in the old and complex, despite leaps and bounds in the technology age. In contrast, American culture moves ever forward without looking back. Language, both spoken and written, changes quickly here from a variety of influences. Street slang, contractions, technology all contribute to the evolution of the English language. It gets shorter and shorter, to make communicating faster and clearer. Everything should be more direct so it can occur efficiently. Efficiency drives American

culture, while tradition still reigns in China. This is just as true for women. American women must be bold, direct, strong, concise and to the point – they know what they want and say it. Chinese women are controlled, bound by unspoken tradition and values, preserving an accepted and aged feminine aesthetic of softness, femininity, and shyness.

I discussed these ideas in depth with Boyang Ma. He concurred with the parallelism between Chinese calligraphy and feminine aestheticism and thought the imagery of ink in water would act as a good visual counterpart to the first quartet's movement. He waited until a significant portion of the first quartet had been choreographed before starting to create the animation to complement it. He felt that the animation needed to echo the dance and assist the dance in demonstrating its meaning. When the dancers sat on the ground doing small detailed movements, he created the animation to mirror them in the uninhabited space at the bottom or middle levels of the screen. The animation condensed into words at significant parts of the dance and dispersed during ebbs in the choreography.

After some discussion, we decided not to use my original concept of English text in the second quartet animation. In the first place, English letters are just characters and pictures; they did not represent nor show an aesthetic trend. Also, given the flamboyance and fervor of the choreography, I did not want to detract from the choreography by having the audience read fast moving text on the screen. So instead of using English letters to contrast with Chinese choreography in the first quartet, Boyang and I decided to use a more abstract imagery of clouds on the stage floor. This seemingly random choice

was not random to me. Clouds remind me of travelling because I came across the Pacific in a plane. When I look into the sky, I always think of travelling and my home in China.

Boyang sent me a short sample of flowing clouds early on after the second production meeting. The clouds were stormy, dark, and windblown. I liked the imagery, it was very passionate, but the imagery was also very smoky, disturbing and dark. I thought while the second quartet is driven, it should not appear so agitated. Furthermore, as this animation would be projected on the floor of the stage, I worried that it might be too distracting if projected on the dancers' bodies and faces. Based on my feedback, Boyang adjusted the speed and color of the clouds to be more calm, similar to what a plane might actually fly in.

After seeing the clouds projected on the floor during the dancing, I thought of another connection to the dance that I had not seen before. Clouds in the sky also represent freedom and openness, for what is more free than a bird flying in the sky? When my dancers stand on stage amid the clouds, doing their unique movements with their individual attitudes, I feel like I am watching them spread their wings and become airborne. They really are casting off the traditions and bindings I had choreographed for them in the first quartet and letting themselves show who they are through the choreography of the second quartet.

Costumes

I worked with Chelsey Schuller on the costuming for my thesis. My initial concept was for the costumes to undergo a dramatic change halfway through the thesis. Originally, I

wanted a mix of Chinese and American influences but I was not able to visualize it. Chinese costumes are often flowy, but neither baggy nor tight. I favored silk fabrics that would fall naturally along the body's lines but also lift away easily and show movement. I thought perhaps a tunic with long, flowing pants then a conversion to a dress without pants would work.

I presented my thesis themes and ideas to Chelsey at our first design meeting. After hearing my ideas and the progress of my thesis designs so far, Chelsey felt that my animation design revolved a lot around Chinese words and aesthetic, but, rarely showed any comparative Western elements. Nevertheless, she suggested we develop costume styles that could change rapidly between Chinese and American styles.

Also, she suggested using a dark base color with touches of red. In Chinese culture, red is a poignant and meaningful color, synonymous with celebration and happiness. I thought the costume would not be complete without some red but as the dance was not only about Chinese culture, it could not be wholly red. Thus we decided on a dark base color that would contrast well with the white set design and the light color of skin to show off the dancers' limbs and movements.

By midsummer of 2012, Chelsey had mock-ups ready for me. The mock-ups were close to what she had sketched on paper. I liked the bodice right away as they were very fitted and showed off the dancers' torsos. There was a little difficulty putting them on and taking them off because of the fitted waist and we discussed fabrics that would

simultaneously still be silky and flowy but also stretchy enough to pull overhead. Watching my dancers move about during the first quartet rehearsal, I realized the lower half was not quite so good a fit. Although having two types of clothing design is very ingenious and I liked it very much, I thought I could not see my dancers' hip movements if the fabric was opaque. After a lot of back and forth, Chelsey modified the cut of the dress and convinced me a different fabric would better fit what I envisioned.

An additional part of costuming had been planned for feet specifically in reference to the theme of foot binding. We had originally thought to try on different types of shoes as strappy flats and sandals are very fashionable now and easy to find in stores. Chelsey brought multiple pairs for me to try, with and without heels, leather and synthetic, as well as in multiple binding styles. I tried them all but while they were lovely, I realized a problem as soon as I sat down to rehearse my solo in them. They hid my feet, in particular, my toes and arch from the audience. And this became our dilemma for while they did bring attention to my feet and made reference to the theme that had inspired the choreography, they also obscured and hid that choreography. While wearing them, I could not see or feel the fold and flex of my feet, particularly in the toes and the arches. Furthermore, they broke my connection with the ground and when I tried to point, flex or balance, the bottom of the shoes became an impediment. I loved the symbolism of the shoes but in the end, they detracted too much from the movement for me to use them. With only three weeks left before the show, we considered other means of footwear – tape, actual clothe bindings, paint – but in the end we decided to forego all footwear.

Two weeks before the show, I saw our final costumes. They exceeded my expectations. The costuming department had hand-painted red flowers inspired by Chinese ink paintings on a soft, white silk and then dyed the remaining fabric to a cloudy grey. Slitted capri pants and elbow length boleros were also completed to complement the dress when it was worn in the Chinese style. Worn in this fashion, the costume was very demure and proper. A black ribbon run through the front bottom seam of the dress allowed the skirt of the dress to be pulled up and tied around the dancers' necks so that it shortened into a thigh-length mini-dress. This was the costume in its Western style. The change while simple transformed the costume into something sexy and flirtatious. The costumes were a wonderful realization of the themes I had discussed with Chelsey throughout the year.

Summary

To me, collaboration with other artists has been a focal point of this project. Multiple repetitions of feedback and discussion have led to the introduction of many new ideas that are all interconnected to my central theme. Looking back I am amazed at how layered, complex and intricate this work has become because of contributions from collaborating artists, my professors, my peers, and my students. To me, it represents the imagination of a collective, not just one person.

Conclusion

As a choreographer, I find my dance themes painted by my personal feelings of performance and life. They are a narrative, experienced through dance awareness and created based on two central principles: meaning and evolution. To me, creation of dance starts with a concept, a meaning that is the soul of the dance. But imagination, the artist's as well as the audience's, gives this meaning substance, evolving it into a tangible work.

I find my choreography heavily influenced by my appreciation for aesthetic beauty, both Chinese and American. It is what drives my imagination and I can find it in many varied sources, including my daily environment. Something as plain as a barren, withered tree can still be beautiful to the observer and I encourage this appreciation to inspire tangents of creativity. With each passing year I spend in the US, I find my sense of aesthetic beauty changing, broadening, becoming more abstract; I think I appreciate things now that I would not have when I first came here. I welcome this growth because it has also fueled my growth as a choreographer and dancer.

Next Steps

I hope to continue creating dance, exploring the boundaries and openings that my thesis research has revealed to me. What I have done so far has been a start. Before doing my thesis, I did not understand what dance research is and how complicated it can be. I think there are more things I can create to supplement the foundations I have created here at University of Maryland. I have many more ideas to incorporate, inspired by my teachers, peers, and students.

After my thesis dance concert of *A World Apart, A Heartbeat Away* at University of Maryland, I got a lot of feedback. The feedback made me realize that there is still more to change, develop and create on this research topic that I have chosen. And so the cycle begins again for me! I hope to evolve my thesis dance in new directions; as it was a narrative of what I thought and felt at the time of its creation, I expect its narrative to change as my life changes and I want to see what it will evolve into in five years, ten years, or twenty years. I will continue to choreograph on this theme and use what I have learned during the creative process here at University of Maryland.

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