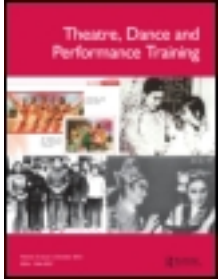


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Rise and decline: reflections through Danscross – a Chinese/UK choreographic exchange

Emilyn Claid

Danscross (2009) took place in Beijing – a choreographic exchange project between Beijing Dance Academy and ResCen at Middlesex University. This writing documents the performance processes of two participating choreographers, Wang Mei (Chinese) and Kerry Nichols (UK). The emerging discussion about institutional contemporary dance training and its influences on choreographic process is set against a backdrop of global political/economic shifts of power, an assumption of which is that the West is in decline and the East is rising. Reflections on Danscross evoke a complexity of contradictions that confuse any possibilities of fixing that assumption within contemporary choreographic practice.

Keywords: choreography, China, spectacle, modernity, performance, interculturalism

1. Alistair Spalding is Artistic Director of Sadler's Wells Theatre, London. This quote is from his unpublished keynote address given at Artscross in Taipei (2011) – the follow on project to Danscross.

2. <http://www.rescen.net/events/danscross09/DANSCROSS09.html>

The west is the past and the east is the future. (Spalding 2011)¹

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. Primarily I present discussion on a relationship between dance training and contemporary choreographic processes, instigated by studio-based observations during Danscross, an East/West intercultural exchange (Beijing 2009). I intend to problematise a polarity implicated in the above statement made by Alastair Spalding, in his keynote address at Artscross – the follow on project to Danscross (Teipei 2011). To explore this layering of intentions I draw on quotes from the Danscross blog,² choreographers' statements, personal narrative and reflection, theoretical parallels and contextualisation.

Danscross was a collaborative partnership between Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) and ResCen Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts, University of Middlesex, bringing together choreographers and research academics from UK and China for a series of choreographic

3. Eight choreographers took part, four from the West: Shobana Jeyasingh, Jonathan Lunn, John Utans and Kerry Nicholls, and four from the East: Wang Mei, Zhao Tiechun, Zhang Unfeng and Zhao Ming. The project was structured in four two-week blocks, with one choreographer from East and West working in each block. Different research academics from East and West attended each block. The project culminated in a conference and performance at the Poly Theatre in Beijing.
4. See RESCEN website for future projects <http://www.rescen.net/home.html>
5. <http://www.rescen.net/events/danscross09/DANSCROSS09.html>

processes at BDA culminating in a public performance.³ The partnership continued with Artscross (2011), which took place at the National University of the Arts in Taipei, adding Taiwanese choreographers and dancers to the mix, and there are plans for future events in Singapore and London.⁴ The aim of Danscross was to explore

New ways to understand an increasingly interwoven world ... Key concerns are to examine notions of the 'contemporary' in performing arts practices, noting both the roots and/or traces of tradition and the rupture of the unfamiliar that can characterise the intercultural exchange. The theme of this year's project, *Dancing in a shaking world* recognises that the key challenges facing us today are common and unconfined by national boundaries: the pervasiveness of climate change, financial instability and viral infections are all part of the wider context. Our focus, however, is on the working environment and on the practices of artists – we examine the particular to see the panoramic, as they create responses to the theme.⁵

I was invited to attend as a choreographic researcher to observe the studio processes of choreographers Kerry Nichols (UK) and Wang Mei (China) and contribute daily to the blog that exists as virtual documentation of the artistic endeavours of the project and providing a playground for reflective thought. Adhering to Danscross' aim above to 'examine the particular to see the panoramic', this writing zooms in to explore close-knit ties between choreographic process and dancers' training.

While at Danscross I became increasingly aware of a gently whispered but nevertheless ever present phrase spoken by my Western colleagues to our Eastern hosts: 'the West is declining'. Implicating, by omission, and with a small bow of the head, that the East is inclining. Western conventions suggest that incline is a movement towards life and success, while decline is a movement towards degeneration and failure. Economically, we in the West are led to believe that the East might be rising and the West declining and these global changes in power are indicated in the projects' subtitles *Dancing in a Shaking World* (Danscross 2009) and *Uncertainty... Waiting* (Artscross 2011), both of which indicate a shape shifting and an unknown refiguration of boundaries. However, I enjoy a different understanding of 'decline' as an artist working within Western contexts of New Dance, postmodern performance practices, physical theatre and post-feminism. My understanding is based on the term's alternative definition: 'give or send a refusal' (OED 1995) – decline as a positive rejection, rather than a downward turn.

So this writing begins with an overview of current trends in UK choreographic practice and dance training to set against the assumed global backdrop of Western decline/degeneration. This overview sets the field and pre-understanding for my visit to Beijing. I go on to describe the choreographic processes of Kerry Nichols and Wang Mei, highlighting some influential effects of training on the performance-making process. The dancers for this project are graduates of BDA and their embodied daily discipline of training inevitably plays a substantial role in defining Eastern and Western choreographic processes. Throughout, I am lightly holding a global theme of rise and decline as a lens to frame East/West relationships between dancers and choreographers, training and performance.

Niall Ferguson (2011), in his Channel 4 series on the decline of Western civilisation, draws our attention to the fast rise of Western civilisation after 1500 BC, due to what he describes as six 'killer apps': competition, science, property rites, medicine, the consumer society and the work ethic, all of which define the modern world. These killer apps allowed 'a minority of mankind originating on the western edge of Eurasia to dominate the world for the better part of 500 years'. Ferguson describes how this great bastion of self-belief, stretching from 'Plato to Nato', began to slump in the 1960s, following world wars and Vietnam protests. Self-doubt took hold. Western civilisation 'became a contradiction in terms. It was nothing more than a euphemism for a blood-steeped, bomb-dropping imperialism'. For Ferguson (2011) it is not simply that the rest of the world now has access to the killer apps, it is that we have 'lost faith in our own civilization'.

Coinciding with the Western project of modernity, dance was developing its codified autonomous form:

From renaissance on, as dance pursues its own autonomy as an art form, it does so in tandem with the consolidation of that major project of the West known as modernity. Dance and modernity intertwine in a kinetic mode of being-in-the-world. (Lepecki 2006, p. 7)

Central to Lepecki's argument is an idea that modern dancing bodies, in a constant display of disciplined, representational, codified movement, culturally symbolise the progressive upward rise of Western modernity.

As the kinetic project of modernity becomes modernity's ontology (its inescapable reality, its foundational truth), so the project of Western dance becomes more and more aligned with the production and display of a body and a subjectivity fit to perform this unstoppable motility. (Lepecki 2006, p. 3)

Just as Lepecki argues for the simultaneous rise of modern dance and Western modernity, so Ferguson's observation of post-war 1960s slump might be considered to parallel 1960s artists' decline from modern dance. There is no need here to reiterate the development of postmodern dance in America and Europe, for this is well documented elsewhere (Banes 1980, Jordan 1992, Kaye 1994, Claid 2006, Lepecki 2006). Rather, let's revisit the term decline as a positive rejection of modernity, rather than degeneration. For artists at Judson Church in New York (1960s), the X6 collective in London (1970s) and Dartington College in Devon (1980s) this positive rejection was a grasp-the-bull-by-the-horns, a call for change, rather than a let's-wait-to-be-trampled-on. We did not wait around to see how Western self-doubt might overwhelm us. We took charge, turning self-doubt into questioning: our disciplined representational bodies, fast-moving uninterrupted movement, technical prowess, individual competitive ownership, narcissistic subjectivity, outwardly expressive dance, reproductive choreography, habitual repetition and hierarchical uses of performing space.

In the 1970s, we experienced a political revolution on our bodies (Claid 2006). With somatic movement practices, feminist thinking, gay liberation and collective organisation we chose to decline the heights of modernism

6. *Society of the Spectacle* is Debord's most published work. 'In the book he takes the position that the spectacle, or the domination of life by images, has subsumed all other forms of domination ... Images are the currency of contemporary society. *Society of the Spectacle* had an enormous influence on the student rebellion in 1968'. See Guy Debord Biography, European Graduate School, <http://www.egs.edu/library/guy-debord/biography/> [Accessed 23 January 2012].

physically and metaphorically. We lay on our backs, rolled over slowly, crawled forwards and backwards and listened to our breathing in order to thoroughly undo any possibility of spectacular dancing on our bodies. Because only in falling, declining, rejecting the move towards the abstract body of spectacle was it possible to let go of the ideals of modernism. I am reminded here of Debord's writing in the 1960s. Debord, leader of Situationists International (a group of French intellectuals and artists from Dada and Surrealist movements), writes a powerful critique of capitalist – and communist – societies' domination by media images.⁶ 'In societies dominated by the modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (Debord 2002, p. 7). Although he is writing from the perspective of spectators and consumers of spectacle, I suggest that, as artists, domination by representational images was exactly what we rebelled against.

Our rejection of modern dance is marked by two postmodern themes. The first is 'giving up of the choreographer's authority' (Kaye 1994, p. 106) to recognise the equal responsibility of performers and makers. Embracing relational practice we collaborate, network and dialogue with one another in the process of making. We develop devising skills that are the shared knowledge of performers and makers. The second is letting go of the continuous highly energised flow of movement, which Lepecki (2006, p. 17) refers to as modernity's 'being towards movement', to embrace conceptual art, cross-disciplinary practice, pedestrian movement, task-like actions, spoken language and improvised scores. In America, the rejection of modern dance began with the work of Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton and a line can be traced through to current work of European artists such as Jonathan Burrows, Rosemary Butcher, Jerome Bel, Lone Twin, La Ribot and Wendy Houstoun. Artists have created a rich framework, an exuberance of networking communities between performers and choreographers, conceptual and live art practices, site-specific events, multi-fronted performance, audience participations, and an understanding of choreography as movement of bodies in time and space that need not include any dance at all. So, Western decline, as rejection, has instigated a rich source of choreographic adventures and performance work that depends on an assemblage of people engaged in relational performance events, rather than an upwardly rising, competitive, dancing code.

Dance training shifted radically to meet the demands of 'declining' choreographers. Here is a chicken-and-egg relationship – where choreographic demand influences training and training produces choreographers with new sets of demands. By the mid-1980s choreographers, aware of audiences' continuous hunger for spectacle yet energised by creative shifts of postmodern decline, sought performers with highly technical codes and somatic understanding of improvisational practices. As director of Extemporaneous Dance Theatre in the 1980s, I commissioned choreographies from artists such as David Gordon, Michael Clarke, Lloyd Newson, Laurie Booth and Katie Duck. They required skills from the performers that were not incorporated into contemporary dance training at the time: skills such as an ability to improvise with movement and text, fall to the floor, walk across the

stage, draw on personal history, contribute to creative process *and* perform a triple pirouette with high leg extension. UK conservatories and university departments adapted to choreographic demand by integrating improvisation, somatic enquiry, body mind awareness and release-based techniques into dance training. With these practices, students learnt to embody stillness, drop to the ground and be present in the here and now. Currently, UK contemporary dance training combines technical skills and somatic awareness, upward balance with running and falling, mirror learning with internal listening. So, decline in the UK is currently represented in contemporary dance by a generation of independent dance performers as thinking dancers, questioning and researching, performer/makers contributing to devising processes, bringing their whole selves to the studio as well as their codified bodies.⁷ This is my home ground, my pre-constructed world – which I take with me to Beijing. Although Western choreographers chosen for Danscross – Jonathan Lunn, John Utans, Shobana Jeyasingh and Kerry Nicholls – pursue an interest in codified, articulate dancing choreographed for proscenium arch stages, their choreographic methods and movement languages are also influenced by an ongoing Western rejection of modernist aesthetics.

7. At the forefront of the independent dance scene was Gill Clarke who died in 2011. As a pioneer and advocate for a somatic approach to dance and choreography, Gill rewrote the undergraduate programme at Laban to include somatic studies and experiential anatomy. As a teacher and performer Gill inspired many young dancers to approach performance with a sense of enquiry and mindfulness. See http://independentdance.co.uk/who/teacher.php?teacher_num=12 [Accessed 7 February 12].

I arrive in Beijing at night. I take a map from the hotel and begin walking, wandering along sidewalks flanked by fast growing upwardly stretching concrete blocks of institutional looking buildings. Bicycle paths border the four lane motorways and both modes of transport are chaotically busy. I stay close to a Chinese family who confidently meander onto the highway – weaving through multiple flows of oncoming traffic from all directions – to reach the other side. Parked in the bicycle lane is a donkey and cart, piled high with watermelons and peaches, which a fruit vendor sells to passing pedestrians. An old man sits on a pavement selling lotus flower heads, lit by the light of a 7/11 grocery shop selling mobile phone top ups, hair gel and instant noodles. Turning off the motorway I am immersed in a tightly packed street market, assaulted by smells of every imaginable kind of raw, barbecued, boiled, roasted and fried meat, fish and sweetbreads, sold from bicycle panniers, oil barrels, camping stoves, rickety tables and improvised tents. Everybody is eating. Dried fish and barrels of green vegetables hang in close proximity to clothes and shoes, rack after rack of cheap garments. Moving on I enter a vast city square to find hundreds of people gathered in groups, dancing. To the left are roller skaters, wheeling round and round a central point, which consists of a bicycle, some boxes and a loud speaker with pop music blaring. Next to them are disco dancers. About ten lines deep, 30 people to each line, moving in unison, each in his/her own way, young and old. I can't see a leader, but everybody seems to know what to do when the music changes. I move further around the square, to where women are dancing a delicately gestured Chinese folk dance. There are old, young, fat, thin, energetic women performing different versions of the same material. Two women with exaggerated smiles, engrossed in their performance, lead them. The music blares out a tinny rendition, drowning the disco beat happening 10 yards away. Next are tango couples, defining their space with yet another sound system. Then lines of men two-stepping, facing their women partners,

performing a courtly dance, stiff and upright, not touching. Moving on I observe fan dancers, lines of colorful fans fluttering in unison rhythm.

I am caught up in sounds, the closeness of bodies, each group of dancers' oblivion of the existence of other formations, yet knowing they are there, together, out to socialize, dancing communities on a hot summer's evening. Mundane ordinariness of repetitive actions becomes special when performed by such large numbers of people. Observers form walls around each dancing group, acting as a boundary. I feel invisible as I wander along the periphery catching glimpses, atmospheres, moods, dancing styles. Skirting the square are walkways and trees, couples resting, kissing, old men lying on their backs on benches working their abdominal muscles and toddlers with their heads shaved, naked, pissing on the ground.

I search out the Beijing Dance Academy. I find myself looking up at a grand institutional building. The previous strangeness of sight and smell is replaced by a return to my familiar dancing body. I breathe a dancer's breath and gather my linearity before entering the building.

The Beijing Dance Academy is a building with seven floors of seven identical studios, accessed from a long corridor on each floor, a hive of dance industry. Founded in 1954, the first ballets to be premiered at the school were a Western version of *Swan Lake* (1877), followed by the Chinese ballet *Fish Beauty* (1959).⁸ Since then the school has earned its reputation as a 'hotbed for excellent Chinese dancers'.⁹

Students audition for the Academy having previously trained in Classical or Chinese Folk dance. Accepted into the school, they continue these technical styles, adding ballet and contemporary dance techniques. Through a consistent daily disciplined routine they become competent at embodying the features from a hybrid accumulation of technical trainings and styles homogenizing 'all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable

8. These two ballets have remarkably similar stories and China Culture says about *Fish Beauty* 'the work was the successful practice of "making foreign things serve China."' Ballet was introduced to China by Russian teachers in the early 19th century and was taught in private ballet schools. See http://www1.china-culture.org/library/2008-01/21/content_38289.htm [Accessed 6 February 2012].

9. BDA director Xu Rui Xu Rui (BDA), <http://arts.cultural-china.com/en/28Arts6291.html> [Accessed 16 January 2012].



Figure 1 Dancing in a Beijing square. All photos by the author (taken on a mobile phone)

surface'. They become bodies 'for hire'; they are trained 'in order to make a living at dancing' (Foster 1992, p. 494).

BDA studios are buzzing with activity and I recognise conventions of institutional dance training as they affect my body – my neck lengthens, my stomach contracts, my muscles tense with old habit. Each dancer works to his/her image in the mirror, externally focused, working alone but in unison, straining and stretching, achieving the spectacularly impossible. And I am reminded kinaesthetically of a modernist frame for this training.

Referring to Chinese dancing bodies as modernist might seem a contradiction in terms, given modernism's association with Western incline, often at the expense of the East.

The kinetic spectacle of modernity erases from the picture of movement all the ecological catastrophes, personal tragedies, and communal disruptions brought about by the colonial plundering of resources, bodies, and subjectivities that are needed in order to keep modernity's 'most real' reality in place: its kinetic being. (Lepecki 2006, p. 14)

The notion of a Chinese modern body intrigues Paul Rae, an academic colleague also attending Danscross. Bodies, under Maoist rule in the People's Republic of China, 'were mobilized, collectivized, emancipated, idealized, aestheticized, disciplined, and eliminated in the service of national progress' (Rae 2011, p. 412). Photographs in BDA hallways of Chinese women in the ballet *Red Detachment of Women* (1964) striving forward in unison with their red boiler suits, balletic bodies and point shoes, leads Rae (2011, p. 411) to write:

The image drew together a conventionally divergent set of practices and discourses concerning gender, virtuosity, and beauty on the one hand, and labor, productivity, and mass address on the other. And while that particular conjunction of economic, political, and cultural imperatives is a thing of the past, the *fact* of such a conjunction clearly remains.

Rae (2011, p. 411) cites Heinrich and Martin (2006), who say 'the body, understood as a series of constantly transforming concepts and practices in cultural and historical context, can be interpreted as symptomatic of Chinese modernities'. Rae (2011, p. 412) suggests that 'the phrase "making modern bodies" can be heard as the choreographic battle cry of Asian modernity and China's reentry onto the world stage'.

BDA is producing dancers who work within a globally recognized set of training principles, standards of technical skill and aesthetic beauty. This representational code is shared by thousands of other dancers across the globe – even though each dancer personalises the training with her/his unique body, racial and cultural background. Individual differences are homogenised through an overarching style of contemporary/ballet that defines institutional training. I suggest that dancers I meet in Beijing, even those who began their training in Chinese folk and classical dance, could work professionally anywhere in the world where codified conventions of theatre dance flourish. I find myself reading each codified dancer's body as a symbol of the modernist world, here in Beijing as fully as anywhere else.

10. See Rawsky's article 'The Rise of China's Economy' (2011) for a clear analysis of China's economic boom.

11. 'Trade in goods and services (imports plus exports) amounts to around 70 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), compared with 25–30 per cent in the cases of the USA, Japan or the European Union' (Schmitz 2007).

12. <http://www.rescen.net/events/danscross09/DANSCROSS09.html> (italics denotes Kerry's spoken words).

China's economic rise over the past 30 years is impressive and the country is poised to take over from America as the world's leading economic power (Schmitz 2007). Mainland China's links with Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, together with 'rising investment flows from multinational corporations', means China is now a powerful market economy (Rawsky 2011).¹⁰ Economic growth has required huge increases in imports and resulted in huge increases in exports and this growth would have been impossible without extensive partnerships with Western companies.¹¹ 'This combination of large size, rapid growth and openness is historically unprecedented' (Schmidt 2007).

If dance, economics and politics are intertwined in their developmental shifts, as Lepecki's (2006) theory of modern dancing bodies implies, an assumption might be that Chinese contemporary dance is inclining towards a modernism I turn now to the particular choreographic processes of Nicholls and Wang Mei. In so doing I discover a complex set of modern–postmodern contradictions.

Kerry Nicholls is working in studio 702. A choreographer in her own right, here in Beijing Nicholls is acting as a mediator for Wayne McGregor, director of Random Dance Company. I interpret McGregor's movement style as hyper-extended, distorted, sinuous, fractured and multi-directional codified dancing, hovering uniquely between ballet, hip-hop and contemporary jazz, explosive in energy, fast-moving and complex. Nicholls has assimilated his style into her own movement identity and draws on his methods for devising material. The following ResCen blog entry for Day 1 (2009) introduces her work:

For me, the work has got to have attack.

For two weeks, you may get tired, because the energy is like this [she punches her fists in the air].

For me ugly is good. I don't want you to look in the mirror and make a pretty shape; it is more a sensation, more about the feeling than what it looks like. A lot of my language is distorted, and so quite extreme. Your bodies are trained, and I want to see how far we can take them. I will sometimes give material, a lot of the time I give tasks for you to find the answers. When I set a task, how you solve it is important to me, the process of how you answer is more interesting than the answer.¹²

Kerry introduces several principles important to her methodology within her introductory statement. The first is distortion, fragmentation and break with flow in her movement language, which offers unfamiliar experiences for these dancers.

Kerry takes a deep lunge to the side, elbow jutting forward, arm at right angles. She circles her elbow outwards. Her chest moves against the circle, arching back, avoiding the arm. Now she has two elbows jutting forward, circling without dropping . . .

Her elbows break behind her back, she suspends, throws her arms forward, falls, her body curves over, her arms come down fast, then her head, sharp. Broken bird's wings. She shunts, hips through, body pulled back, all weight on her back foot.

**(2)****(3)**

Figures 2 and 3 (2) Wang Lei & Yubin rehearsing Kerry Nicholls' *Cleave*; (3) Wang Lei & Wushuei rehearsing Kerry Nicholls' *Cleave*.

Movements are unpredictable, always catching a surprise, playing with dynamics, texture, speed, drop, turn, curve, circle, jump, arc, smooth, low, effort, hard, soft, sticky, silky, long, dragged, punctuated, staccato, with very fast

13. Ibid.

changes. This non-hierarchical, fragmented movement defies conventions of beauty, yet creates a beauty of distortion to replace.¹³

The second principle is Kerry's demand for highly charged speed and energised dancing, a mode of learning and dancing familiar to these dancers. Kerry wants to jump the dancers' bodies out of complacency, out of the smooth circular risk-less perfection of Classical Chinese dance. Working at speed is vital. Faster is better. The dancers excel at picking up material instantaneously. Movements are delivered urgently and executed with high energy and there is no time for hesitation. Pushing them into high speed Kerry hopes to drop dancers into chaos and catapult them out of their habitual patterns and surprise them out of their comfort zone. But there is a contradiction here with Kerry's demonstration of unfamiliar movement language. For the way dancers assimilate material fast is to make the unknown familiar. The dancers grasp the movement without having time to notice or assimilate difference. A super-efficient codified body takes over and new movements become familiar by fitting them to a habitual code already deeply established on each dancer's body. I shall return to this contradiction later. Kerry is aware of her demand for speed knowing she must keep energy high if she is to get her piece finished within the two-week time slot.

She expects her dancers to contribute to the process, improvising and creating material together. During the first week she asks them to work as a group, lifting and carrying each other across the space. The dancers seem embarrassed to improvise together, unable to work with each other in contact, unable to let go of the mirror view of themselves. They are not in relation to one another in the here and now. They do not see each other dialogically while dancing, almost as if to relate to one another in the here and now would be a sign of disrespect to Kerry. These superbly articulate dancers produce halting, stiff, inorganic material when asked to improvise in collaboration with each other. I suggest this is a consequence of codified mirror-based modern dance training and the drive towards a technical abstract spectacular body. Dancers work together but in isolation. In the production of spectacle, some dancers become *not* present to one another – in the name of unity.

The abstractifying of all individual labour and the general abstractness of what is produced are perfectly reflected in the spectacle, whose *manner of being concrete is precisely abstraction*. In the spectacle, a part of the world *presents itself* to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is simply the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very centre that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness*. (Debord 1967, p. 16)

Although challenged by collaboration, BDA dancers work brilliantly alone, with tasks that require them to manipulate material into individual solos, which they can do while watching themselves in the mirror. They create solo phrases juxtaposing gestures with different body parts. They give direct attention and precision to a multiplicity of directions. Kerry directs these solos into duets and group formations.



Figure 4 BDA dancers rehearsing *Cleave*.

During the process I notice how Kerry's choreography requires dancers to break with codified movement at times and move into pedestrian action. For example, walking from one place to another, between dance phrases, to meet another dancer.

What happens when dancing stops and walking begins? Can the dancers break out of the representational style to walk from A to B, or will the walk become a codified statement? Can walking constitute a gap in the dancing, a pragmatic action, or is it a fully performed statement? Must a gap become a statement? How do the dancers see each other? They work in duets with no eye contact; they meet code-to-code, tightly robotic. The dancers project themselves in the mirror of their idealised bodies.¹⁴

14. Ibid.

15. Foster (1992) calls this body the 'perceived' body as opposed to the ideal body.

Academy training nurtures each student towards a professional, disciplined, ideal body. For this the tangible resistant body must be left outside.¹⁵ This body – the ideal body's sparring partner – is one that constantly spills out, rebels, goes its own way, gets tired, frustrated, forgets, laughs and is unwilling to conform. A resistant body also questions what is taught. From a young age students struggle between these two bodies on a daily basis and an aim of training is to subsume a resistant body into an ideal body. As fully trained performers, simple pedestrian actions of stillness, walking and looking become problematic for Kerry's dancers. For these gestures require an undoing, being in the here and now, respecting non-representational resistant being.

Leaving Kerry I move next door to studio 701 where Wang Mei is working. Wang Mei's career spans ballet, Chinese folk and ethnic dance. She also studied modern dance in America. Having won choreography

16. <http://www.rescen.net/events/danscross09/DANSCROSS09.html>

prizes in Bulgaria, Finland and China, she is an acclaimed choreographer who has 'crossed disciplinary and national boundaries working as a teacher and choreographer'.¹⁶ Wang Mei has a different choreographic approach to Kerry and I experience the difference kinaesthetically rather than cognitively. Without an understanding of Chinese language I am dependent for the most part on observation and behavioural responses to understand what is happening. For the entire process, Wang Mei and her dancers sit or lie on the floor. At first I imagine they are working on a small detail of a larger piece and that soon I will see how this floor material connects. But no, the floor material is the piece. My body becomes contained and calm, as I am absorbed in an intensely detailed exchange between choreographer and performers:

Day 1 – The dancers are sitting, facing the window, in a vertical line upstage. They work with movements of babies. I notice contradictions between a baby's developmental patterns of movement, release-style dance gestures and exact unison with precise timing.

They practice lying in a horizontal line across the stage and shifting to sitting in a vertical line upstage – in two musical beats. There is laughter as they try to accomplish this task, which is achieved by using less effort, moving economically with minimal energy. Less is more for Wang Mei and movements are stripped to a bare minimalism.

Day 2 – The dancers are sitting on the floor again, discussing the fine details of moving forward on their sitting bones. Who moves first, on what count,



Figure 5 Dancers rehearsing *Untitled* by Wang Mei.

the quality of the move and the extent of each preparation are discussed collectively.

Day 5 – Each dancer's movements bring a counterpoint to the whole, a 5 part score. How are they reaching decisions? It seems to take a very long time! Wang Mei seems passionately absorbed in details.

Dancers are sitting on the floor facing front, swaying slightly, forward and back. I am caught by stillness within the movement. A minute change in gesture, a small shift in direction, become almost shocking. The micro moment is given macro attention. They collaborate, owning the discoveries together.

Day 7 – For Wang Mei, reality is one dancer communicating with another. If you are working alone you are empty. Reality and emptiness: in Chinese these are opposite. Wang Mei seeks a co-operation between everybody.¹⁷

17. Ibid.

She encourages a collaborative, talkative minimal approach rather than isolated, individual working to the mirror image. Yet she is directing every move.

Day 8 – I am watching them lying on their backs. Wang Mei is working with each dancer on how to initiate an arch of her/his neck so that his/her eyes can look back towards us. A very slight movement, imperceptible at first, grows out of nothing. They expand the very start of the gesture. I observe how hair slides along the floor. Does the arch begin with movement of the eyes, or a shift in the neck? Nothing becomes something.

Wang Mei: *What I am concerned with most is my current personal feeling, about life, the reality of living – people.*

Emilyn: Rather than the codified dance?

Wang Mei: Yes.

Emilyn: Does that thread through all your work?

Wang Mei: *Yes. I would like to say I do not like dancing at all.*

[We laugh] ... I really wanted to put my personal feelings into this piece, the relationships between people ... I ask each dancer to be 'human' not a 'dancer'. There are dance performers who create a big distance between the audience and the performers and I want to close that gap, to be human.

China is changing very fast; Beijing city is changing every day. You go to some area and you go there the next day and it is changed. In this very fast rhythm of life, people are rushing, they don't want to stop, and they don't want to concentrate on something.¹⁸

18. Interview with Wang Mei, translator Xu Rui.

There is little to unite the processes happening in studios 701 and 702, although both choreographers are attempting to reject a flow of movement; Kerry by introducing a fragmented distorted movement language and Wang Mei by resisting movement through space. For the most part the processes contrast one another. Nicholls' presence is sprightly, physically precise, her words and movements cut space, she projects outwards into the world and she does not slow down. Wang Mei's presence appears unobtrusive, she talks animatedly yet quietly with her dancers or sits for periods waiting, allowing



Figure 6 BDA dancers with Wang Mei rehearsing *Untitled*.

19. Posted in China Papers: 'Wang Mei's choreography is also faced with a crisis. Under the "progressive" trend of today, Chinese modern dance has not escaped its cultural destiny of "traditional modernity": Step by step it falsely validates the route of Western modern dance. What's special about Wang Mei's works is the evident revolt position in her multi-narrating of approval and revolt to this cultural destiny' (<http://mt.china-papers.com/2/?p=232494> [Accessed 7 February 2012]).

silence to come forward. Wang Mei appears not to be in a hurry. For her, dancers talk. For Nicholls, dancers are silent. Nicholls often arrives with ready-made movement phrases, which she transfers onto the dancers, testing their abilities to remember. The dancers copy, exercising familiar, mirror-learning capabilities. Wang Mei, on the other hand, seems to be discovering movements with her dancers in the here and now of the process, searching for an internal source within each gesture. Wang Mei and her dancers oppose the dance altogether and the Academy's technical codes fall out of the window. Nicholls urges for excess energy, working with hyper-extended bodies, movement that uses space in expansive extremes. She wants to take the technical skill of the dancers further than they can possibly imagine. Wang Mei is seeking non-spectacle, movement that is non-representational, group consciousness, working with an economy of gesture. Her work confronts and indeed declines BDA's drive towards stardom with her careful and slow attention to miniscule detail. Nicholls works with fast rhythmic time, coaching and cajoling dancers to move with precise attack. Wang Mei works in slow pedestrian time, opening up potential for uncertainty. Nicholls focuses on points and lines, dynamic accents, multiple, movement directions. Wang Mei works without marking space, nothing much happens – something small becomes magnified. Nicholls sets a positive atmosphere of hypertension in the studio, pushing the dancers beyond their comfort zones. Wang Mei's dancers, who are responsible for their own energy and drive, embody an attentive emptiness. Wang Mei seeks a slower pace and I am curious whether she desires a return to a past existence or she is signalling a future path for dance in China.¹⁹

Uniting both processes is a particular quality of respect – more than respect – a kind of surrendering of dancers to choreographers. The dancers slip out of their everyday selves to become compliant, honouring, respectful and admiring bodies. Something about this surrender seems particularly Chinese. Although beyond the scope of this paper I am curious here how ‘Marxism and Confucianism have certain intrinsic similarities, namely that the wise, all-knowing state knows what is best for the masses’ (Hays 2008). Early communist rule (Mao-style Marxism) rejected and attacked Confucianism. But with the adoption of capitalism (multimillionaires are included amongst the Party’s membership), the Communist Party is concerned ‘about a growing vacuum of belief in China’ (Reynolds 2009). Faced with this crisis to fundamental principles, the Communist Party ‘went back to basics – to Confucius’ (ibid.). Confucianism is based in respect for social order, knowing one’s place in the family, the state and particularly in education where, ‘teachers and scholars were regarded, like oldest males and fathers, as unquestioned authorities’ (ibid.).

Following this line of argument, a Confucian dynamic suggests that dancers adopt a pathway of submission throughout their training, making each body ever more vulnerable to teachers who can wield a training over the empty canvas of each body ever more successfully. And without question, these dancers are exceptionally brilliant at perpetuating the ideal body of technical spectacle. Perhaps an arc can be drawn here between teachings of Confucius and Foucault!²⁰

A quality that disconnects the processes more than any other is the speed of working: Kerry fast, Wang Mei slow. I return now to a paradox I mentioned earlier: how can dancers assimilate new knowledge while working at speed?

Institutional dance training, with its insistence on a young student’s immediate embodied representation of what is perceived, creates bodies that come to depend on habit memory to execute movement. While training, movements are demonstrated and dancers must copy exactly what has been demonstrated without delay. Then movements are repeated until they become habit. Grosz (2004, p. 169) interpreting Bergson (1988, p. 111) describes habit memory as: ‘a series of mechanisms stored from the past, waiting for activation in the present ... in which the body “remembers” what it is to do without conscious intervention, yet that once needed to be consciously learned before being automatized’. With habit memory in place a dancer can copy at speed, movements are slotted into each dancer’s habitual movement patterns, overriding the potential for change. For change to happen dancers need to slow down, notice, choose and assimilate difference. Bergson (1988) suggests that a delay is required between perception and action, where re/action to stimulus is automatic yet not without conscious thought, allowing bodies to ‘discriminate and classify’. Through delay a body exercises a freedom of choice, which ‘serves to filter, simplify, highlight or outline those qualities of the object that may be of relevance or use’ (Grosz 2004, p. 165). The aim of institutional codified dance training is to reproduce without delay, without discrimination. Swallowing training whole limits a dancer’s abilities to choose, cuts down the risk of rebelliousness, discourages uncertainty and perpetuates habit memory. For sure, some benefits of swallowing whole include an ownership of physical skill, a sense of agency that

20. The arc is between Confucian encouragement of submission of young people to the teachings of their elders who will then make them into ‘superior men’ (Hays 2008) and Foucault’s ‘docile bodies’, which he claims to be a consequence of the emergence of disciplines in eighteenth century Europe: The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful ... The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it ... Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. (Foucault 1977, p. 138)

comes with having an articulate body and a ticket on the fast train to economic security. Yet crucial to that sense of agency is the price that is paid, to act with automatic reflex and habit memory in the face of new knowledge. Through unquestioned, repeated embodiment on a daily basis over many years, 'the images used to describe the body and its actions become the body' (Foster 1992, p. 484). Awareness of difference is lost and newness is fitted into habitual patterns.

Take a high leg extension – perhaps the most ingrained habitual gesture of the institutional dancing code across the globe. For a dancer, the higher the leg extends the greater the economic security. This refined skill is currency, a necessity for a successful professional career. Yet often there seems little embodied awareness of this aesthetic resource. At BDE, when Kerry asks a dancer to lift his leg to the side – hip height – I watch as he instantaneously lifts his leg up above his head, with perfect linearity pointing to the sky. He hardly notices. I observe automatic reflex, habit memory and effortlessness, linked to embodying what is perceived without delay. Juhan's (2003, p. 266) description of an engram as 'a discrete sensory record of a particular gesture or series of gestures' explains this phenomenon physiologically.²¹

21. 'The engram is the cortex's means of learning new skills and behavioural patterns, and of imposing them upon the primitive levels of our motor organization' (Juhan 2003, p. 275).

The 'learning' of a new motor skill is the process of establishing a new series of sensory engrams, and the ability to repeat the performance of that skill depends absolutely upon the preservation of the intact sensory engram. (Juhan 2003, p. 267)

As gestures are repeated over and over sensory engrams become more and more stable requiring 'less and less focused attention, until many of our laboriously learned skills become almost as automatic as any primitive reflex' (Juhan 2003, p. 268). Codified dance technique becomes automatically and effortlessly recalled via engrams, created through repetition of action.

Often, as a consequence, dancers' effortlessness also becomes sensation-less. Juhan (2003, p. 270) directs us to the counter-productivity of an engram, whereby 'its motor responses can operate so compulsively that they can override almost any amount of current sensory input'. Furthermore this overriding is a 'life-saving advantage ... rather than succumbing to fear, pain and shock' (Juhan 2003, pp. 270–271). Overriding pain is expected and students in training repeatedly disassociate themselves from pain, provoked by daily stretching and externally driven discipline, in order to achieve a leg extension. The gesture becomes effortless, speed efficient – but also sensation-less. So a choreographic demand for a *different* leg extension requires, firstly, a slowing down to notice the difference, then an awakening to effort, bringing each dancer into an unknown present where sensation is felt. This is a challenge for institutionally trained dancers meeting new choreographic processes – to retain physical skill *and* mindfully notice difference.

I return to Beijing three months later to observe the performance of the choreographies. The processes I had observed have now become finished works, absorbed into an institutional performance package for a proscenium arch stage – where spectacle is paramount.

Kerry's piece *Cleave* finishes the performance evening with aplomb, slick finesse and choreographic confidence. No declining here. The dancing is gorgeous and I am wowed by spectacle while dismayed at a lack of here and now contact between performers. Moments of relational uncertainty that had emerged in the process are subsumed by the dancers' habit memory. Kerry's dancers feel a sense of achievement that movements no longer feel strange. Yet this is not necessarily an achievement. Discomfort, effort and embodied strangeness in Kerry's choreographic process defined its uniqueness. As it is now, the work fits the BDA aesthetic and everybody is happy.

Everybody is not happy with Wang Mei's piece. Her piece fails within this context. A silence surrounds it in post-performance discussion and it has become an elephant in the room. The performance, *Untitled*, is a far cry from the minimal, absorbing, intimate process that I observed earlier. Wang Mei's choice of music has safely packaged the non-representational movement into a representational box.²² The original dancers have been replaced. Their costumes are incomprehensible – dominated by hooded tops complete with bunny ears.²³ The slow detailed minimalism of her process has deposited Wang Mei out on a limb. In production week she is conspicuously invisible. I feel sad, as her process seems to have been invalidated in the BDA's overwhelming drive towards spectacle. She is drowned out by a Chinese love of representational bodies where dancers have become the idealised workforce in a uniquely combined capitalist and communist society.

In the context of other choreographies presented at Danscross, these two pieces contradict expectations. The other Chinese choreographers focus on stunning, illusive fantastical narrative based pieces, with representational coded bodies of expressive transcendence.²⁴ The other Western choreographers, working with the same dancers, are compromised into a middle ground as they encourage devised process and relational presence with dancers whose training contradicts these methods. Considered in this light, Nicholls, a choreographer of the supposedly declining West, seems to adhere to a Chinese rise to modernism, while Wang Mei's work may signal a not yet envisaged (or encouraged) declining future for contemporary dance in China. Between them they flip East/West assumptions. Wang Mei's piece, in particular, problematises Spalding's opening remarks at Artscross (2011): 'I come to this region and I feel a sense of exhilaration in the air. Everything and anything seems to be possible'.

Figural in Beijing is how seductive modern dance spectacle continues to be, symbolising economic success for China. Yet I sense an underbelly, an uncertainty for real living bodies. Walking the streets I see people surviving, day-by-day, undergirding glamorous spectacle, overshadowed by ever-present smog that shows no sign of lifting.

Spalding (2011) also looks beyond his first impression to note:

The changes here in the East are full of potential pitfalls – huge rates of inflation leading to the possibility of overheating economies, real dangers to the climate due to unimpeded industrialization. And perhaps the changes in the West aren't so awful, perhaps this crisis has focused our minds on other aspects of our life ... our friends ... how we educate our young people ... We are living in a time of rapid economic and cultural change where cracks

22. Music: Prelude to G. Major Cello suite No. 1 by J.S. Bach (adapted by Fan Zongpei).

23. These bunny-hooded tops were for sale in the market, a cheap synthetic gimmick alongside the plastic pink dolls and glittery soft toys.

24. See <http://rescen.net/blog/>.

are appearing in the foundations of old empires whilst growing pains are felt in the new.

Wang Mei's piece jolts me, throws a fissure at the rising star of China. Is her piece a crack or a growing pain? Is China a new empire, or an old empire renewing? Are cracks a sign of collapse? Perhaps the words of Leonard Cohen's *Anthem* (1992) are appropriate here: 'there's a crack in everything, it's how the light gets in'. Wang Mei delivers a piece that turns spectacle on its horizontal side, puts a spanner in the works of a shining machine. And perhaps she is saying – watch the emptiness of spectacle for there is nothing real there.

Following the East–West project of Danscross, I don't pretend to know how spectacular Chinese dance spectacle will become. And it is not for me to suggest that slowing down and mindfulness might be useful tools for institutional dance academies to integrate into contemporary movement training. I do know there is only one place to go from the dizzy heights of a leg extension – and that is down. The strength of Danscross, and Artscross, is in the daily work of meeting, talking, moving and making, demonstrating how intercultural relations of power, subjectivities and otherness, sameness and difference, rising and falling, are möbiusly-swirled, roller-coastered, and intimately interwoven. And for me, with world powers shifting and shaking, falling to ground is an OK place to be.

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