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## Dancing My Way Through Life; Embodying Cultural Diversity Across Time and Space: An Autoethnography

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## Dancing My Way Through Life; Embodying Cultural Diversity Across Time and Space: An Autoethnography

### Abstract

In this paper, I research how my background, in different times and within diverse spaces, has led me to exploring and working with specific Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs. I am forever motivated to engage students learning second languages by providing them with possibilities to find out who they are, to know other ways of being and meet diverse peoples, to maintain languages more effectively and maintain culture(s) more authentically. I employ autoethnography as a method to discover and uncover my personal and interpersonal experiences through the lens of my dance related journeys. The method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is used to analyse and interpret my early formative years, my changing sense of self, the communities that I inhabit, and my overarching belief in dance. In this paper I describe my embodied emergence of cultural awareness and knowledge.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Lived Experience, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Language, Dance, Movement, Kinaesthetic Intelligence, Embodiment, Identity, Multicultural Awareness, Mutual Respect

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### Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

As a dance practitioner, teacher, historian, researcher, and currently a PhD student, I was fortunate enough to receive an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship to financially support my doctoral studies. My research focuses on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs and the place of performing arts, specifically dance, in the methodology and curriculum design for learning a second language such as Chinese. At my first PhD meeting with my supervisors, Dr Maria Gindidis and Associate Professor Jane Southcott, I was asked, “Nina, could you please tell me why you chose to apply for a PhD degree on this topic?” Immediately, following that question, I felt tens of thousands of words stuck in my throat, but I could not decide which word to choose first at that moment. Later, I realized there were a multitude of reasons inherently driving me to implement this research, and they were all linked to the importance for me of cultural awareness. This awareness emerged, took shape and evolved as a companion on my journey of personal, interpersonal and dance experiences. Until that moment in time of the question I was asked, I realised I had never deeply thought about my motivations as a researcher before. What are my research motivations? How do I focus my research topic on performing arts in CLIL? So, I have embarked on this autoethnography armed with these research questions hoping to uncover or discover a possible answer to this question.

## Methodology

As a Chinese woman, performer and teacher, I have been always told to think objectively and not run the risk of being interpreted as subjective. However, life and events are not predictable and people do not always behave as others expect them to, especially when it comes to research (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Personal circumstances and external

factors can influence the results of research. Researchers have their right to decide what, how, who, where and when to research, and at the same time they take institutional requirements and resources into consideration (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In addition, conventional scholars with canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done are receiving more and more criticism for being too theoretical, ignoring the barrier between reader and text (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011; Holt, 2003), and not being able to find “a vehicle to operationalize social constructionist research and practices that aims to establish trustworthiness and authenticity” (McIlveen, 2008, p. 13).

In an attempt to explore and discover my position as a researcher in the research space I was embarking on, to challenge my personal bias, position my own research to make sense to a wider audience and have greater impact, I chose autoethnography as the research method (Bochner, 1997; Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) argue that, “Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (p. 274). The authors also state that many scholars using autoethnography concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience. It is this research they argue that sensitizes readers to issues of identity politics or places a lens to experiences shrouded in silence and to forms of representation that can deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography is a hybrid of autobiography and ethnography. It is a qualitative research method following the process of narrating and/or describing research data-collected from personal and interpersonal experience(s). Even the compound structure of the word, “auto,” from the Greek meaning myself, and “graphy” meaning the written text or writing allows for analysing/interpreting the data collected systematically, achieving the product of the in-depth cultural understanding (ethno) for insiders and outsiders (Chang, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016; Reed-Danahay, 1997, 2001, 2017).

I applied Chang's (2016) autoethnographic data collection strategie of chronicling to this study, which is the technique of recalling personal and interpersonal events and experiences and putting them in chronological order. My personal memory was used first-hand to recall the past. I wrote down as much fragments of lived experiences in my entire life as possible in a chronological way. This data framed the textual database. Then I borrowed some ideas from Chang's (2016) inventorying strategy that refers to listing bits of autobiographical information and ranking them by importance. I made a list of thematic categories including value, proverbs and ritual. I searched my memory storeroom again on those themes and the new-born fragments were added into my memory. I realised that the younger I was, the less I remembered and only a very bare skeleton of memory was left (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Those vague memories seemed confusing and I sought ways to clarify them

by drawing on and finding information from my body—my embodied knowledge, and also from personal diaries, pictures, former dance performance programs and notes, articles, and certificates. After the personal data collection process, I turned to one of Phifer's (2002) “idea-gathering strategies” (p. 21), and thought more about people who had been important to me in my life including family members, friends, and mentors, and in so doing others were integrated into my study. I video-chatted with my parents and talked about things happened in the past to remind me about things I might have forgotten. I asked them to find old photos and send them to me. Talking to my parents and looking at old photos and artefacts made my memories clearer and raised new ideas. I am not quoting my parents directly but just asked them to help me remember about my life. I thought, explored and reflected on my memories which led me to become deeply contemplative and re-appraise my life. Chang (2016) points out that, “self-reflection can lead to self-transformation through self-understanding” (p. 57).

As an autoethnographic study, the research was an ongoing process even after narrating and describing personal and interpersonal experiences, using my memories together with collected and meaningful artefacts. I interrogated my experiences by looking into them with the analytic strategies employed in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I read and re-read my texts, and at the same time wrote free analysis on similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications and contradictions. Following that, I made comments on emerging themes such as dance, language and education. Then I overarched the emerging themes and found some significant topics (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Through these self-observation, self-reflection, self-understanding, self-analysis, self-examination, and self-evaluative journeys, I realized how my multicultural awareness was formed, expanded and embodied. I engaged with different cultures—Mongolian, mainstream Chinese and western. This tripartite cultural awareness has been evolving and intertwining throughout my life together with my personal, interpersonal, and dance experiences in different times and spaces, and it is still changing and growing.

As dance was an important part of my life and movement became my mentor and conduit to acquire cultural awareness, I consequently view my whole life as a process of cultural embodiment. And I prefer to name my cultural understandings which came to me through bodily activities as “embodied knowledge.” This article presents and uncovers my way of cultural embodiment in different times and spaces in chronological order of narration using four acts. In Autoethnography, the subject of the research is the researcher, and the researcher observes his or her observing, interrogates his or her thought and belief (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Analysing with IPA, researcher studies participant’s thought and experience from their own perspective, and more specifically it explores how participant’s personal and social experience is given meaning by themselves (Smith et al., 2009). I present the embodied knowledge by pieces of dance with simple present tense and the authorial voice altered into the third person. Evocative autoethnographies may be written in the first or third person (Méndez, 2013). Third person allowed me to interrogate my remembered first person self.

So that the erstwhile me is not just memory but a real person. And I can invite my readers and the current me—the researcher into the research subject’s—Nina’s world to experience what Nina has been experiencing, to find out if Nina has any biases and preferences, and to experience Nina’s advantages and disadvantages (Pelias, 2018). Since autoethnographic writing reveals “the deep connection between the writer and her or his subject” (Goodall, 2000, p. 137), I hope this autoethnography can make my authentic cultural experiences familiar to my readers, and make them evocative enough to engage my readers to seek more comprehensive understandings of my current research.

Embodiment is a term and word I use repeatedly and need to introduce, unpack and offer a definition for. What the term, embodiment, represents in this paper is not confined within its traditional conceptual scope, it refers to a broader context. Barbour (2011) notes that, “Embodiment encompasses an individual person’s biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, social, gendered, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural, historical and geographical location” (p. 88). In part I agree with Barbour (2011), I believe that embodiment does encompass diverse experiences, however the experiences gained outside an individual person’s “cultural, historical and geographical location” (Barbour, 2011, p. 88) when interacting with others could also be included in embodiment. In this way, embodiment is inclusive of those personal and interpersonal experiences acquired in different times and spaces.

Shared conceptions of body and experiences of movement can often be a primary means for people to understand, to know and to make sense of self, others, and the world (Novack, 1990). Those kinaesthetic ways of investigation, in Barbour’s words, are “embodied ways of knowing” (Barbour, 2004, p. 227). Culture is embodied and culture is able to be uncovered

through bodily activities. Novack (1990) explains the connection between movement and culture in detail, “Movement constitutes an ever-present reality in which we constantly participate. We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it” (p. 8). Movement and culture create virtuous circles when they stay together. Therefore, the position of kinaesthetic activity, or to be specific, the position of dance in culture, learning and expression is worth discussing and inevitable. Each of the cultures I danced (Mongolian, Chinese mainstream and minorities, and western) required changes to my embodied performances. As I discuss in my stories, the movement and body placement in Mongolian dancing is different to that required in Chinese dancing (both folk, traditional and modern). It is complicated and my body responds differently in each of these genres and styles. This is what I mean by embodied culture.

As I built my story, digging and delving through my memory, my co-authors were my sounding boards. They questioned my assumptions and challenged me to explain not just what but why and who. They sculpted my writing and were my companions and critical friends. Their input to this work was the lens of critical friends who, by prodding and pushing, shaped me as author.

## Act One

**Time: 1990-1997**

**Space: Home, Hohhot, China.**

**Cultural Embodiment**

On a day in 1990, I was born in Hohhot, a developing provincial capital in China. Before I could enroll in kindergarten, my maternal grandparents spent most of their time looking after me. They loved me very much. My maternal grandmother is pure Mongolian. She can speak both Mongolian and Mandarin very well. While my maternal grandfather belongs to the Han ethnic group. He can only speak Mandarin with a strong northwest regional accent. When I was a toddler, I was not really interested in eating, but running and jumping anywhere and anytime, so I looked a little skinny. My maternal grandmother was really good at cooking. She always made delicious food expecting me to eat more and become stronger. She not only made me traditional Chinese food, such as noodles and dumplings, but also Mongolian dishes. I liked those dishes with yoghurt and butter, and I think those experiences influenced my eating habits for a long time.

My parents also took me to my paternal grandparents’ home sometimes when they were free from work. I am the first grandchild of my generation in my paternal extended family. Since all other family members were adults and I was the only child at that time, I was always in the spotlight in my paternal extended family. I felt I was loved by everyone there, including all the brothers and sisters of my grandparents, and all the uncles and aunts. My paternal grandparents are both Han, they also speak Mandarin with a very strong hint of northeast regional accent. As my role models, my paternal grandparents worked really hard and never stopped learning new things from books, the internet and people around them.

Although my mother’s ID card shows that she is Mongolian, she knows little about Mongolian culture. With my father speaking Mandarin, I was taught Mandarin with a mixed accent of northwest and northeast region. I spoke this form of Mandarin when I was with my grandparents, then corrected by my parents when I was at home. Family planning was one of the basic national policies of China between 1982 and 2018. Most of my peers are the only child of their parents. My parents, however, were permitted to have another child since my mother is Mongolian, but they decided not to have a second child and instead placed all their

love to help me become successful. My parents convinced me that people can make dreams come true by hard work. They worked very hard expecting to provide our family a more promising future, and they tried their best to satisfy all of my needs and most of my wants.

I remember clearly that I could hardly ever get my father ruffled. He is well-read and interested in both Eastern and Western culture. I think Confucianism more or less influenced the way my father educated me. He always tried to show me that it was important and meaningful to be good enough to help others. “To be good” is the reflection of Confucian “Self-cultivation” practice, and “to help others” is the reflection of Confucian “Ren” and “Yi” concepts (Yao, 2000). Parents and children were all equal in our family. I had the right to express myself even if how and what I expressed was considered by adults as bad ideas. Sometimes my father was really strict. He would definitely give me a stern look if I continuously made mistakes on the same thing. But he also had the ability to let me understand and feel his love.

My mother is also a role model of mine. She is a doctor and professor now, and she is always busy with her patients, students, and research. In my childhood memories, my sleeping time was always linked to the companionship of my mother reading her academic books and taking notes with an old pencil. My mother commenced her Master’s degree study when I was 6 years of age, and I remember this clearly as it was the same year of the Games of the XXVI Olympiad.

My mum finished her classes very often late in the evenings. It became mine and my father’s routine to meet my mother at the bus station and walk back home together in the dark evenings. I remember it was Olympics time in the middle of 1996. I enjoyed that period of time watching live broadcasts and rebroadcasts of sporting occasions on television with my father. Among all those genres, the competitive artistic gymnastics fascinated me most. I watched those athletes almost open-mouthed as they flew accurately between the uneven bars, walking elegantly on the balance beams, and pointing their toes beautifully in the floor exercises. I spontaneously imitated them in movements and poses. I tried to balance on one foot at home. I tried to run and leap outside on the ground. And I even tried to bend backwards into a bridge position on my bed. I just could not stop imitating these physical arts, arts that in my young mind were beautiful expressions of movement.

### **Embodied Knowledge**

It is a cold, windy, and snowy winter night. Little Nina and her father, as usual, are going to the bus station to meet her mother. Nina steps out of the room in a thick duck-down jacket. She walks along the slippery track carefully in the dim light with her father following. The bitter wind flows through Nina’s fingers—she puts her hands in the pockets. The icy snow falls onto Nina’s cheeks—she pulls the hood down shadowing her face. But nothing seems to work, it’s getting colder and colder. What little Nina hopes for most this day is to meet her mum and jump into her embrace at the bus station. However, the trek ahead is so long and so hard today, little Nina feels frozen. “Hey Nina, why don’t you jump onto the balance beam!” pointing at the curb her father says. Puzzled for an instant, Nina runs onto the curb ecstatically, putting her left foot behind the right foot. She lifts her right leg up carefully with the knee straight and arms at her sides at shoulder level, trying to keep herself in balance. She makes a step forward following her left leg kicking backwards high into the air. Nina is surprised by herself because she has never imagined she could do this. “It’s almost there, and the gold medal is waiting for you!” Nina’s father encourages her. Then Nina does a set of little runs along the curb on tiny feet, then spins and slows down. Suddenly, Nina makes a half turn, although she feels unsteady. She takes a deep breath to calm down and steps back very carefully to transfer her weight upon one foot only. This time, Nina makes her half turn gracefully. Just as Nina is thinking about



whether she will try a full turn, she is already at the bus station! “Congratulations on your success Miss Zhang!” her father says drolly, pretending he has a gold medal and a bunch of flowers in his hands, presenting them to the excited little Nina. Nina thanks her father as she watches the bus coming. Nina’s mother alights from the bus with her arms open, and Nina jumps in. The family hug together tightly, and then they walk back home singing and discussing their warm dinner waiting for them.



*Figure 1: My mother and me in my father's eyes*

## Act Two

**Time: 1997-2009**

**Space: Outside, Hohhot, China**

**Cultural Embodiment**

Finally, I am seven! Seven is the age to enroll in primary school in China. I was so excited when I met many new friends at school. I learn that more than Mongolian and Han, there were other ethnic groups living with us. I had classmates who belonged to the Hui and Manchu ethnic groups. I learned that China consists of 56 different ethnic groups, and the Han ethnic group has the largest population. I got to know that people have different habits, and my Hui classmates told me they do not like pork. I also learnt that the city we were living in – Hohhot, where is a part of Inner Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia is an autonomous region, where there are more Mongolian ethnic group populations than other provinces in China. I began to learn dance at a local studio in the same year.

One day I was staying with my friend. While we were enjoying ourselves, laughing and playing, her mother came by and said it was time for her dance class. My friend invited me to go with her, and I said yes without any hesitation. I still remember that the teacher was beautiful and elegant with long hair fastened in a bun at the nape of her neck by a pink satin ribbon. And the classroom was spacious and bright with mirrors on the wall. The little dancers were all girls



who had been having lessons for a while. My teacher graciously asked me to join the girls. I found that I could do everything she wanted, and even some techniques my trained classmates could not achieve. I could spin around, do the splits, bend backwards into the bridge position as well as dance with others. I was elated and happy, and I wanted more. My teacher gave me a pat on the back and said I would be welcome if I made up my mind to keep coming to the dance class. I raced home and asked my parents if I could. I was really happy when they answered yes. But they added if I started, I had to keep going every week. I was thrilled! Of course, I wanted to be there as many times as I could! That was the beginning of my relationship with dance. As time ticked away, I kept attending dance classes every week and had lots of fun.

It is a Saturday when I was at senior level in primary school and I attended my dance class as usual, I walked into the classroom, I remembered vividly “smelling” something different in the air, this I later discovered was “tension.” There were two or three perfect strangers sitting beside my teacher. The girls were so quiet and you could have heard a pin drop. I did not know what was going on, but just tied up my hair and finished my class as I usually did. After a few of days, my parents were informed that their daughter was invited to Beijing to receive formal dance education. My parents talked about this opportunity with me. After asking me for my opinion, they said that they did not think I was ready for that. I agreed with them. I was content that at this moment in my young life I could dance and still keep my academic grades high. So, I stayed with my dance teacher for twelve years before I moved to Beijing. I learnt mostly Mongolian dances, and also learnt Tibetan dance, Uyghur dance, Korean dance, and ballet with my teacher. We held performances once a year for family and friends. We sometimes participated in outside activities. But I did not really enjoy performing, although I always performed well during that time. I came to understand that dance is not only a means for pleasing others, but it could also have more profound effects on people. That was all I knew about dance in my childhood. It was a personal artistic expression of the body but held a power I was yet to discover in my future years.

I did not consider dance as an indispensable part of my life until my parents reminded me that I might need to think about university when I was at the beginning of year 11 at secondary school (the second to last year of high school). They examined all the possible choices with me. What surprised me most was that I felt really upset when I imagined going to university without dance. It was at that time that I realized how much I was in love with dance. I wanted to know more about dance, and I sought to learn something related to dance at university. My mother noted that it was not easy for dancers to get jobs. In other words, she did not want me to be a dancer. To some extent I agreed with my mother. I did not want to be a dance performer. But it was not due to the job issue. It was because I believed that I could do something more with dance. However, I was not sure if I could achieve that goal. I struggled and cried. I wanted an opportunity to give myself a promising future, but at the same time I just could not give up on dance which was integral to my understanding of me.

After a few weeks of discussion, I finally made up my mind. With the support of my parents, I applied for the Beijing Dance Academy – the most prestigious dance institute in China. It was a difficult decision, and it redoubled my parents’ and my workload. I went to school from Monday to Friday. I went to dance classes on Friday nights, Saturdays and Sundays. I took private dance training lessons every lunch time on weekdays and ate my lunch as my parents drove me back to school from the dance studio. I completed my homework while doing splits on the floor to remain flexible. I had to eat less and read more. I knew that if I could pass the first-round auditions, I then needed to complete a written “dance critique” paper for the second round. Writing was not difficult for me, but I had never heard of dance critique before. There were no teachers who could help me with this subject in Hohhot and I was not able to learn it in Beijing since I had to keep attending school. I knew that I could not achieve

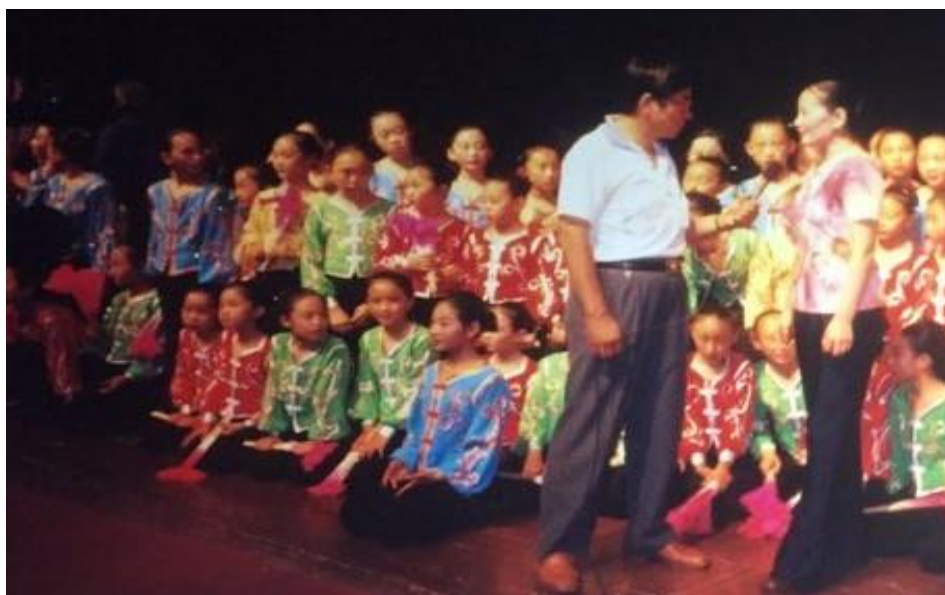
it without adequate information. So, I asked my father to buy some books written by academics from Beijing Dance Academy and asked him to help me with the useful information in those books.

I arrived at the Beijing Dance Academy for my audition. I walked into the imposing building that was full of dance studios. Suddenly I was not the best in the room. It was the first time that I felt an increasing anxiety and became downcast when I realised that. The first round comprised of three tests—first was physical ability which I was really good at, second was a dance of my choice—I chose a Mongolian dance as that was my strength, third was improvisation which was a little difficult for me. I hardly had any real experience improvising my dance routines. My teacher back home had always told me what to do. In the moment, all I could do was listen to the music, feel the emotion and then move my body. It all went quickly and I waited outside expecting my number to show up in the list of second-round invitations. Finally, I was led to another building with classrooms inside for the second-round examination. Since I was not exactly sure if the dance critique information my father gave me was correct or not, I was even more nervous. It proved to be correct, because I was accepted to Beijing Dance Academy where I stayed for seven years – four for a Bachelor’s degree and three for a Master’s degree. After the audition, I went back home to finish my secondary school study and participated in the General College Entrance Examination like all my classmates did.

Everything was ready, and all I wanted to do before I left my hometown was go to the grassland one more time. In China, whenever people talk about Inner Mongolia, the first thing comes to their mind is the grassland. It is not only because the Inner Mongolian prairie area is vast and beautiful, but also because it is the place where Mongolian ancestors lived. Strangely enough, I had only been there, reluctantly, no more than three times in the past nineteen years. I did not know why I wanted to go there at that very moment, but I just did.

### **Embodied Knowledge**

It is a few days before Nina leaves her hometown for college life in August 2009, she sets foot on the grassland again. It is a midsummer morning. The grassland looks like a soft, green carpet. Nina takes her shoes off, stepping into the grass with her eyes closed. Taking a deep breath, she slowly transfers the weight of her body from one foot to the other as she can truly feel the grass between her soles and the earth. The sun rises and the river sings. Nina feels as if she is entering a place like dreamland, a stark contrast to the clamour of the city. Bathing in the golden, warm sunshine, Nina opens her eyes a fraction. Numerous kinds of wild flowers are in bloom, and wisps of smoke are rising continuously from the yurts scattered on the grass. With her right hand up, Nina shifts her weight lower by flexing her knees outward. She moves the left leg forward with her left big toe touching the ground. From shoulders, elbows, wrists, knuckles, to fingertips, she raises her left arm up into the air and puts her right arm down onto the grass at the same time. Then she shifts her weight up and turns moving into the depths of the grass. When the gentle breeze brushes against the grassland, herds of horses and cattle and flocks of sheep seem to rock and envelop Nina in a big cradle. Nina curves her upper body, touches her hands in the grass, and kneels her knees onto the ground. She sits tight, and she lies satisfied as she twists her body inch by inch deeper into the grass. Nina feels that she is part of this beautiful land. At that moment, she realises that she has missed an important part of her life. She senses somewhat connected to her ancestors and carries their bravery and peace within her.



*Figure 2: My dance community in Hohhot.*

### Act Three

**Time: 2009-2016**

**Space: Beijing**

**Cultural Embodiment**

I settled in Beijing in 2009. This was the first time I left home to live alone. I enjoyed campus life but missed my parents so much, even though they were just 500 kilometres away from Beijing in Hohhot. I video-chatted with them very often. I felt helpless and lonely when I realised that my parents had gradually ceased helping me with my life's decision making. Luckily, I had a number of close friends from my secondary school. They were elites in different university disciplines studying also in Beijing. I now acknowledge those friends were important to me, and they had had a significant impact on my way of thinking and behaviour. I once lost my way in year 10. I became a trouble-maker in classes and I disappointed people around me during that period of my adolescence. Some of the top performing students in my class who became my best friends later on never gave up on me. They not only helped me with my academic studies, but also influenced my thinking and my early conceptual values of life. It was these friends who constituted and created the main force pulling me out of my adolescent quagmire. What I learned from them were the values of being kind and helpful, as well as hard-working. They made me recognise that I needed to improve myself, find my confidence and in turn to help others. This was also what my father had taught me. I and my friends were in different universities and studying different disciplines. We formed new friends and lives in Beijing. We got together when we were tired and we supported each other when difficulties emerged.

As an undergraduate student in an arts dance specialisation, I dedicated myself to both theory and practice, choreography and performance, dance science and aesthetics, contemporary, classical, western and eastern dance. I learned as much as possible. There was a national library within walking distant of our campus. The librarians were friendly experts with linked contacts in nearby Universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University. The national theatre was easily accessible by bus or by subway. I also presented at an international conference in Dunhuang, China during this time. I obtained several scholarships which were awarded according to general achievement and taught dance in different contexts.

After studying at the Beijing Dance Academy for four years, I realized that there were many dance performers but fewer dance researchers, especially researchers of dance history and legacy. I also learnt through dance that there are thousands of cultural and ethnic groups in the world, and that people have different values and beliefs. I noticed that people moved and danced for different reasons. I familiarised myself with Classical Chinese dance values and their unique aesthetic characteristics of Xing (outer shape), Shen (inner spirit), Jin (power), and Lv (rhythm). I also learnt that people needed to dance with their knees in a flexible position when presenting Tibetan dance; Uyghur dance was more cheerful and energetic; some sequences in Dai dance evolved from the movements of peacocks. Dance has had a very long history. Since there were people, there was dance. One person's cultural history should not be limited by where she or he was born, or be confined within which country geographical physical space that she or he was living in. There is a wider more complex and sometimes unfamiliar world behind each. I formed the belief that dance, or kinaesthetic awareness and engagement can be a wonderful guide to open up diverse worlds. I was eager to search and to see if I could turn these possibilities into realities, I decided to stay with Beijing Dance Academy and conduct research into dance history.

As mentioned earlier, I am part Mongolian. It was during this period of my life I began to realize how sad it was for me that I could not write, speak, or even understand Mongolian. I knew so little about Mongolian culture. I began to study, research and tried to perform a significant dance in Yuan Dynasty (founded by Mongolian ancestors) which had been lost previously. I wanted to re-connect with myself by digging it out. I completed a literature review in the library and on the internet. I did field work in China's Mogao Caves, where much useful information linked to my topic are supposedly to be found. The caves are in the city of Dunhuang in Gansu Province. There were countless grottoes decorated with Buddhist statues and frescoes and most of the caves were created between the fourth and the fourteenth centuries. After much work, I became fixated on Cave No.465. I went inside the dark and bleak cave with a specialist in Dunhuang studies accompanying me. There was a double-stack stage at the centre of the cave. I examined the images carefully with a special torch which would not cause damage to this precious legacy. Suddenly, I found that one part of the picture on the wall was totally lost. I had wanted to see it in person so badly, so I travelled to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in Russia to view this missing part after a few months of my visit to the cave. At last, much pictorial data had been uncovered with the help of the specialists in the field. My journey was partially successful as some of these were still not documented. During this research process, I felt that it was difficult to find archaeological data and to read and understand the original literature written in Mongolian. It was hard to understand without the language and kinaesthetic awareness. I gradually recognized even more the importance of sustaining and maintaining language and cultural heritage.

I made my final decision to leave Beijing to migrate to Melbourne in 2016 (I had been to Australia twice, 2014 and 2015 respectively). During my visit to Melbourne, I viewed performances with Chinese ladies moving their bodies in strange costumes at a number of formal events stating they were dancing the Chinese classics. I was confused and even felt embarrassed, I felt that these dances were not authentically executed or understood. I also met more Chinese-Australian migrants and had a brief introduction of Chinese community in Australia. In those moments, I felt that, to some extent, I shared the same experiences with them. China and Australia are both multi-cultural countries. I was born and grew up in China as a Mongolian in a minority ethnic group, just like migrants with different backgrounds living in Australia and other countries. Our desire of knowing self and others is awakened again and again when we step from familiar spaces to unfamiliar spaces (Chang, 2016; Hall, 1959). Certain events which make us feel disoriented and disconnected accelerates the cultural awareness process (Chang, 2016; Stephan & Aboud, 1999). Sometimes we are not aware of

who we were, and sometimes we refuse to acknowledge who we were, however at a certain moment, point in our lives, we begin to spend time reflecting. We love to explore who we were and are. We inform others of who we were and we have a chance to know who they were. We all become proud that we have been in a space and time together and will continue to explore and understand who we are. Day by day, a little voice in my mind told me that I needed to do something. I might be able to provide a new generation with the possibilities to know themselves and empathize with others. I had the opportunity to offer this generation my experiences so they may not regret like me, or become confused when they grow up, similar to the Chinese migrants presenting hybrid and incorrect versions of Chinese dance.

### **Embodied Knowledge**

Finishing her presentation at the final review in the meeting room, Nina races to her beloved studio in the Beijing Dance Academy. Imagining she is in the Mogao Cave No.465, she turns off the lights, draws the curtain, lights a candle, and walks straight to the centre of the studio. All the images and memories of the past move through her mind into her body. Breathing in, Nina steps leftwards with her hands positioned like a lotus flower. Breathing out, Nina bows with her right palm in front of her left shoulder and left hand beside her hip to show respect. She then performs the same but in a reversed combination. Following this, Nina drags her right foot forward, raises her left leg with knees curved as she breathes in. She shifts her weight onto the right hip as she breathes out. After shaping a lotus flower image with her hands and inhaling, she goes back to the centre and puts forward her left foot with forearms crossed approaching her heart. Exhaling, she stands on her right leg, raises her left leg, and sweeps her left foot towards her left elbow remaining with her hands palm-to-palm over her head. Feeling the air on every inch of her skin, she goes back to the centre pose peacefully. She feels connected with the world. She is ready to go out to share and communicate.



*Figure 3: The International Symposium on Dunhuang Music and Dance*





*Figure 4: With my students at Beijing Dance Academy*

### **Act Four**

**Time: 2016-now**

**Space: Melbourne**

**Cultural Embodiment**

After finishing my Master's degree in July 2016, I found it difficult to tear myself away from Beijing. As the day set for departure drew near, I told myself that I had to get ready for Melbourne. I got a chance, not long after I arrived in Melbourne, to attend a Community Language Teachers' Methodology Course in the Faculty of Education at Monash University where I met Dr Maria Gindidis, one of my future PhD supervisors. I was then invited to participate in writing the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Senior Chinese Course-Chinese Language, Culture and Society. Meanwhile, I started to teach Chinese and dance in Melbourne. I taught my students Chinese language. I taught my students dance and the knowledge behind the dances in Chinese. I asked them to sing what they had learned as they were dancing. My students were happy feeling they had learnt a lot. I knew it was the right time to make learning Chinese an embodied experience for students, to make it practical for teachers, and to create a rationale for principals and parents. Gradually, the idea of doing research about CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010), programs for Chinese second language and fusing the arts came into my mind.

### **Embodied Knowledge**

It was my intention to leave the "embodied knowledge" section blank in act four. I know as the process of "cultural embodiment" is still ongoing, I need to keep learning, practicing, and researching to fulfil the "embodied knowledge" exploration and understanding and it is a part of the goal I set out to be achieved in my PhD journey.



*Figure 5: With my students at community language school in Melbourne, Australia.*



*Figure 6: With my students before their performance for Chinese Teachers' Day at the Consulate General of China in Melbourne Australia*

### **Findings, Continuation, and Conclusion**

Now I can clearly see that my life consists of my complex, fluid, embodies personal identity and agency that is enacted through my dancing and my teaching of dance to others. My embodiment of different cultures, genres and styles is part of my construction of my sense of self as individual and as a member of my communities. I use the plural because I exist in different communities – I am Mongolian, I am Chinese, I am Australian. As I move forward



through different times and spaces to find a home in my current research I find myself reflecting on where I have been and who I am. My social identity is born of my heritage and the diverse cultural contexts that I inhabit which interweaves creating its own rhythm and sometimes links with other cultures and spaces. The concept of Confucian “Self-cultivation,” “Ren,” and “Yi,” and the practice of “to be good enough to help others” drove my personal journey. It offered me a strong sense of responsibility to conduct research. As a member of a minority group born in a provincial capital in an autonomous region of China, who then moved to the capital city of Beijing, then migrated to Melbourne, the changing of spaces and living contexts gave me opportunities to experience cultural diversity. These experiences lay the foundation of my social identity and made me focus my research topic on Chinese as a second language. My personal philosophy that dance is much more than a form of entertainment, but also an artistic language expressing cultural diversity for people to connect with the past, present and future was also a strong motivational force. Dance is a “bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence” which has the power to provoke other existing intelligences and allow new intelligences to emerge (Gardner, 1999, 2003). Dance can serve as a valuable tool for embodying learning another language and revealing the undeniable commonalities of the human experience.

I am experiencing my early settlement in Australia. Since my friends here in Australia found it was difficult to correctly pronounce my Chinese Pin Yin name, I gave myself an English name, “Nina” for their convenience. I did not suffer from identity and racial crisis in this country, although I have met and faced some challenges during this period. For example, I drove myself crazy by my lack of English sociolinguistic competence, encompassing knowledge about the appropriateness of form and meaning (Byram & Hu, 2013). I am still striving to know and learn from others, and to become the best version of myself as I can. I am a dance practitioner, so I “know” things through my body. I am a Mongolian, so I feel connection between myself, grassland and my ancestors. I am a Chinese, so I believe in Self-cultivation, Ren, and Yi. I am an Australian, but the knowledge to answer the why question has not yet been fully embodied. Ultimately, I am myself – just an ordinary person shaped by the complex process of “cultural embodiment” who wants to make a contribution to the world by knowing herself and others and working hard.

Finishing this autoethnography, I feel relaxed and refreshed. I have never looked deeply into myself and people and things around me as carefully as I did during this process. Although it was challenging during the time of exploring this task, I re-discovered myself, my research intention and others better by doing this. I found this process explored different parts of me after collecting artefacts and writing all the vignettes that occurred throughout my life. I believe there will be new times and spaces that make up who I am when I reflect ten years or twenty years from now. I know I still need to move, experience and interpret dance. We acquire language, culture, and awareness through daily activities. As time goes and space changes, there are old routines discovered and that remain whilst new experiences appear, as Chang argues in her work on the research method of autoethnography (Chang, 2016),

Through annual, seasonal, weekly, or daily routines, people acquire language, customs, and traditions and become enculturated into patterns of a society. As society undergoes changes, some routines remain constant, others disappear, and new features emerge as new routines. Although personal and familial routines are not always synchronized with the rhythms of the broader society, their patterned routines of life are likely to reflect those of the culture in which individuals participate. (pp. 74-75)

The body however, can and does keep travelling as the human spirit must have a home. By autoethnographically exploring oneself, one can know the real self and others better. With

authentic inner-cultural and inter-cultural understanding, mutual respect and cultural diversity, a society will become richer. In this global world, it is vital that we recognise and value the culture of others and one way in which we can do this is through learning about the culture of other peoples, and one of the most effective ways of doing this is by learning their arts, particularly dancing.

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