

**Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy**

**Thesis for BA in Dance**

# **A Reflection on My Personal Experiences**

**A Comparison between Chinese and Western Ballet Education**

**Amsterdam, August 2018**

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## Abbreviations

ABT - American Ballet Theatre

ADA - Amsterdam Dance Academy

BA - Bachelor of Arts degree

BCDA - Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy

Competition - International Ballet Competition in Lausanne, Switzerland

HNB - Dutch National Ballet, Amsterdam, Netherlands

KC or Conservatory - Royal Conservatory at The Hague, Netherlands

M - An experienced dancer

MA - Master of Arts

NBS - National Ballet School of Canada, Toronto, Canada

Pas de Deux - White Swan Pas de Deux

Prix de Lausanne - International Ballet Competition in Lausanne, Switzerland

SDS - Shanghai Dance School in Shanghai, China

Vaganova - Vaganova system of Russia

## Executive Summary

The paper draws on my personal experiences as a student of classical ballet in China and Canada, a professional ballet dancer in the Netherlands and a teacher of professional ballet in the Netherlands and China, and compares the ballet education between China and the West based on those experiences.<sup>1</sup> They are described in 12 examples. I also discuss certain difference between the Chinese and Western ballet education in this context.

1. Motivation in learning dance: Being motivated is fundamental, and the motivation to learn dance can be interest, as in Example 2, or a passion that is developed later, as in Example 1.

Example 1 described how I was pushed into learning dance at the direction of my mother, and later developed a passion and love for dance. Example 2 is about my students in the Netherlands, which explained that their motivation was mostly personal interest in dance.

2. Different approaches of dance teaching:

- a. Strict vs. facilitating approach: Teaching takes place sometimes in a strict environment, while some other time in a facilitating environment. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, and can be selectively and appropriately applied towards the other.

Example 3, the Chinese Blanket Skills training<sup>2</sup>, is a good example of the strict Chinese teaching; and Example 4, the Vaganova method, is used as an example of the Western ballet teaching.

- b. Room for improvisation or self-expression of students: Building a solid foundation during studies of ballet is important, because it provides basis for further development and enhanced improvisation as well. However, the foundation itself is

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<sup>1</sup> More discussion about the motivation of the thesis can be found on page 7, Background.

<sup>2</sup> More information about Blanket Skills can be found on Page 15, Example 3.

not enough, and it is the passion and expression that fills up one's performance with energy, and thus makes it interesting for the spectator.

Example 5 introduces a strict Chinese dance class where students followed rules diligently, while Example 6 is about a rehearsal at the Dutch National Ballet in which a choreographer encourages the dancers to express and be interesting.

- c. Communication: For dance students and dancers, communication can be through language or contacts of eyes and bodies, either in classroom or on stage.

Example 7 describes the rehearsal and coaching that I received about the eye communication with the audience, and how it helped the performance and my development.

- d. Focused technique vs. overall presentation: In a ballet performance, acting makes dance lyrical and dance adds to the beauty of drama. They complement and promote each other. While improving the dance technique, the ornamental and artistic value of the drama is very important to deliver the roles and the story.

Example 8 describes a coaching session relating to the White Swan Pas de Deux of the ballet *Swan Lake*, with a primary focus of the acting side and its importance in a performance.

- 3. Training in dance technique: Most schools apply the similar technique training, however there are slight differences between the Chinese and the Western teaching.
  - a. Technique development: While having strong technique is not enough to produce a good performance, it is a fundamental quality for professional dancers.

Example 9 and 10 discuss the coaching I received for the same piece, the James Variation of *La Sylphide*, from a Chinese and a Western teacher at different time, and how they prioritize differently between the technique and the broader counseling.

- b. Individual vs. partnering and group technique: Being able to adjust and intelligently choose the best strategy is a testament of a mature dancer. In one occasion a good dancer is required to be able to stand up and show off technique, while in another to stay back and dance along a large group.

Case 11 is my observation how a dancer with superior individual technique saved an entire performance when his partner was injured. Case 12 is about my own rehearsal experiences where I learned to compromise my own self-expression for the best result of the group and the entire performance.

I was fortunate to have experienced the learning environment and cultural background of both China and the West, thus write to share for the benefits of me and others. As described in this paper, there are many differences; however it is very hard to say which one is better than the other. Overall, I think it's important to understand the context, and pick the best accordingly. In addition, I endeavour to find a balance in my own teaching, a balance to "teach" as much as I can in a disciplined way, and to facilitate "learning" in an encouraging manner. I must say also that some of the examples, or my experiences, may not be completely representative but rather happened in a specific circumstance, and are referred to as examples and reflections.

## Background

I gained insights to the ballet education in both China and the West, primarily the Netherlands, Canada, Russia and Hungary, through my experiences as first a dance student, then a professional dancer, and now a dance teacher. During the first year of my studies at BCDA, I received encouragement from the faculty, reflected on certain of those experiences and performed analysis of a few specific topics within the ballet education in China and the West. Now I intend to perform a more thorough comparison and analysis from the perspectives of 1 ) the motivation of study, 2 ) the approach of education or pedagogy and 3 ) the technical training based on my personal experiences.

As ballet is a highly practice based art that involves an extensive amount of physical movements, in which the physiques and abilities of dancers play an important role, the ballet education is also highly practice oriented. As a result, the methodology of this paper is mostly through the reflection, discussion and analysis of my experiences as examples, with the objective to provide a useful reference and direction for ballet teachers.

Since the analyses draw primarily from my personal experiences, first I introduce my background. I joined the Shanghai Dance School in Shanghai, China (“SDS”), at the age of 9 to study classical ballet, and at the age of 16 I won the second prize at the International Ballet Competition in Lausanne, Switzerland (“Prix de Lausanne” or “Competition”). Thanks to the scholarships given with the prize and also from my school, I went to continue my professional ballet studies for two years at the National Ballet School of Canada, Toronto, Canada (“NBS”). Upon graduation in 2005, I joined the Dutch National Ballet, Amsterdam, Netherlands (“HNB”). Then I spent 11 years as a professional dancer with HNB till 2016, when I left the company for health and career planning reasons. Afterwards I became a ballet teacher for professional and amateur dance students, and took the position of a ballet teacher for professional students at the Royal Conservatory at The Hague, Netherlands (“KC” or “Conservatory”).

When I worked at the HNB, I have developed a keen interest in dance education. I also undertook a part-time dance teacher position at the Amsterdam Dance Academy (“ADA”). The professional dance career has given me a lot of dance knowledge and experiences to share, while at the same time I was eager to get more systematic knowledge of dance teaching. As a

result, I enrolled in a teacher's program of the Vaganova Ballet system of Russia ("Vaganova") in 2010, and obtained a teaching qualification after two years of study and practice. The studies at Vaganova were demanding as I continued my dance career, however I valued it and considered it an investment for my future. Chinese ballet education follows the roots of the former Soviet Union or the Russian school, and my dance learning in Shanghai is very compatible with Vaganova. I appreciate the rigorous and normative concept of the Vaganova teaching system, and find it to be a good framework not only for the students, but also the teachers. As part of these studies I taught at ADA and other dance schools, including ballet classes, rehearsals and choreographic creation. I realized that I enjoyed teaching and sharing my knowledge and experiences, and furthermore being watched and followed by the students.

Three years ago, in 2015, my left achilles tendon got totally ripped during a rehearsal, mostly due to long-term fatigue, and as a result I was not able to realise any stage performances for nine months. During this recovery period, the HNB asked me to teach and provide artistic guidance to the ADA students. As I taught more frequently, I slowly discovered that there is similarity between teaching dance in a classroom and performing dance on a stage. On one hand both are about giving, even though a dance teacher's audience is much smaller. On the other hand, a teaching (or studying) session is much more interactive, as the teacher often receives immediate feedback, and his satisfaction is influenced by the improvements of the students.

Following these experiences, I decided to end my dance career and dedicate my time only to teaching. I became a ballet teacher for professional and amateur dance students, and took the position of ballet teacher for professional students at the KC. I like my teaching profession, and the Vaganova's teaching system greatly helped my work. By the reason I have worked together with many choreographers and teachers in different dance styles, I very much hope that my dance teaching is a "fusion" of styles. Moreover, a pure classical ballet dancer cannot meet the requirements of the audience and dance companies, therefore contemporary dance and other forms of dance are also important for the professional dance students. For this consideration and the desire to enrich my grounded and theoretical knowledge in dance education, I started to look for graduate school opportunities. I thus found the BCDA MA Program, which suits these needs well.



BCDA has a very broad offering, and I am able to meet and work with many other artists of different backgrounds, thus I can be exposed to a wide range of development opportunities. The program has a pragmatic approach to focus on discussing and exchanging prior experiences through essay writing, which further inspires new ideas. During the first year of study, I delivered more than 10 essays, including a few on topics concerning ballet education in China and the West. I was intrigued by these specific analyses, and, with the encouragement from the BCDA faculty, I am now presenting this paper.

As explained above, the methodology of this paper is primarily the reflection of my personal experiences, presented as examples, from the three periods of my professional dance related career:

1. Studenthood: I reflected on the dance education that I received in China and Canada, and also analysed certain dance coaching that I received as a student. My experiences as a dance student in both China and the West are useful material for this paper
2. Professional dancer years: I shared my experiences of working with various choreographers and other dancers as a professional dancer with the HNB. I believe these are valuable to many dancers and dance teachers.
3. Dance teaching: I became a dedicated dance teacher in 2016. I tried to draw on the good points learned and apply to my own teaching work. I also share certain experiences and observations from this position.



(Image 1: Chao Shi; Source: Dutch National Ballet)

## Primary Areas of Study

As part of the reflection and analyses, the comparative analysis focuses on three primary areas:

1. The motivation in learning dance;
2. The approach or pedagogy of dance teaching; and
3. The technique training.

Most of the analyses are based on my experiences and observations as dance student in China for seven years, dance student in Canada for two years, professional ballet dancer in the Netherlands for more than 10 years, dedicated dance teacher in the Netherlands and China for more than two years. Even if I was not able to perform a survey of large population or conduct a deeper research, I try to make use of examples based on my own experiences over 20 years.

I discuss each of these areas below.

## The Motivation in Learning Dance

While it's fundamental that a dance student likes to dance, there are differences in the motivation of each person. Some are interested in dance from the early age; others, including myself, develop such an interest over time. Example 1 and 2 discuss each example.

### Example 1: How I became a professional dancer

When I was a child at kindergarten, I showed certain talent in performing. At the age of nine, I was chosen and admitted to the Shanghai Dance School to study ballet as a state funded student, meaning that the government paid the tuition as well as partially funding living expenses. The competition was intense and only 10 were selected among the nearly 4,000 applicants. As a result, it was considered as a prestige, available only for those who are excellent in all aspects of quality. My mother was the most excited, as she dreamed to become a dancer when she was younger.

In the beginning I found the studies at the dance school to be very boring and strict. In addition, it was not uncommon to be seriously injured, to experience a sprain or even to faint during the trainings. After the first semester of study, I decided to leave and give up. At that time, all I could think was "this is too hard". My mother spoke to me persuasively several times to change my mind. She tried to explain to me that there were only a small number of people in China who could study art and the number of ballet students is even smaller. Furthermore only a small portion of them are state funded students. It would be too much a prestige to give up. She convinced me in the end. To be honest, at that age, I did not quite understand all that she said or the prestige she felt, but did feel proud as many others were also treating me nice, so eventually I agreed with her that it must be good for me to continue. It was later proved that she was right and I did have the talent. I won multiple prizes in China and abroad, including a second prize at the Prix de Lausanne, which enabled me to study in Canada and become a professional dancer with the Dutch National Ballet. Through all these periods, my mother has been firmly supporting but also pushing me.

Over the years, I have asked myself many times whether I like dancing, and I have always confirmed it to myself. From time to time, I felt the positive answer could also be the result of years' of work and achievement, or even the responsibility towards others who supported

me, for example my mother and later the audience. Being successful and recognized is rewarding, even addictive, and the progress including the applause from the audience have been part of the push along my dance career. However, most the time I say that I really like dancing.

To sum up, I started and continued my dance study due to the push from my mother. However over the course of my career, my love and passion for dance also grew by itself.

### **Example 2: Motivation to study dance of the KC students.**

Working as a ballet teacher at the KC, I interacted extensively with the students and also with their parents from time to time. I asked many students why and how they started learning dance, and most of them answered that it was their own choice because of interest. This was also confirmed in the meetings I had with their parents. At the KC, there are parents' meetings twice per year. I found these occasions challenging, because many parents neither had an understanding of dance and ballet, nor did they follow the children's dance study closely. As a result it was hard for me to explain the children's progress. I also asked some parents how their children chose to study dance, and most answered that it was because of the children's own interest. Some said that their children liked the dance dress or think it looked beautiful to dance on point, who wanted to learn dancing as result. Most parents also gave me the picture that the children were not stressed out after the dance training, and continued to be energetic and dancing around at home.

Since the ballet classes are held after the regular classes, it takes extra effort from the students. Without the push of parents or others, studying ballet requires a strong interest, which they have all demonstrated in the classes.

### **Comparative analysis of motivation to learn dance**

Despite the fun part seen by the majority of those who are not in the dance profession, dance is very demanding and learning to dance can be boring. Thus it takes a strong motivation for students at professional dance school.

According to Jim Taylor and Elena Estanol, sport psychologists, “Motivation provides the foundation for everything you do in dance. Prime motivation involves putting in as much time, effort, and energy as you can in order to achieve dance goals. It means training with sufficient frequency, volume, and intensity to get the most benefit from your involvement in dance. Prime motivation is based on the three Ds: Destination - Decision - Dedication – Motivation” (Taylor, Jim / Estanol, Elena, (2015), *Dance Psychology for Artistic and Performance Excellence*, U.S.A: Human Kinetics)

Examples 1 and 2 demonstrated this path from Destination through Decision and Dedication to Motivation:

I and my students at KC all obtained motivation, which enabled us to put in the extra efforts and continue the very demanding study. My students at the KC had their motivation based on their personal interest, which is a Destination of their own choice. This comes from the heart and has a clear goal. Their motivation is more sustainable, but their beliefs are very firm.

My dance learning originated from the direction of my mother, which was an “assigned” Destination that developed into its own form of motivation. Further I became motivated by constant progress and achievements in dance. Thus the external recognition and the internal appreciation and enjoyment of dance became my continuous motivation. There is the other kind of motivation. At the start, there is no clear motivation or goal, but after the efforts and achievements, the confidence is built up and the interest is developed and enhanced.

To summarise, I quote Jim Taylor and Elena Estanol again “Motivation lies at the base of the prime dance pyramid. It is the foundation on which every dancer builds everything we do in dance. Whether it is required or desired, motivation contributes personal ability and difficulty to dance performance and even wider dance future for all of us.” (Taylor, Jim / Estanol, Elena, (2015), *Dance Psychology for Artistic and Performance Excellence*, U.S.A: Human Kinetics)

### **Approach of Dance Teaching**

Drawing on my experiences as a student under both Chinese and Western teachers, and also as a dancer working with various choreographers as well as a teacher to the Dutch and Chi-

nese students, I observed and discuss below a few areas of general differences in the approach of dance teaching.

- a. Strict vs. facilitating approach;
- b. Room for improvisation or self-expression of students;
- c. Communication;
- d. Focused technique vs. overall presentation.

I explain below each of the four areas using primarily my personal experiences as examples.

### **A. Strict vs. facilitating approach**

I have experienced very strict training for seven years in China with the SDS. Based on conversations with many other Chinese dancers, their experiences in term of the strict teaching approach are similar. My general observation is that the Chinese ballet teaching employed a strict attitude and is highly demanding to the students. Chinese training dismantle the dance moves, and each move gets trained with great intensity, over 100%, to push over the individual's limit, repeatedly, so as to achieve the highest degree of accuracy of the body and expression. On the other hand "Western educational theory currently favours a constructivist approach, where students construct (build) their own knowledge, merely facilitated by the teacher." (Ken R. Levinsohn, (2007), 'Culture Difference and Learning Styles of Chinese European Trades Students', *Institute for Learning Styles Journal*, Volume 1, Fall 2007, pp.12 - 22)

#### **Example 3: Blanket Skills**

Example 3 is an example of strict approach, based on my experience of studying in China. I followed a very strict dance learning curriculum in China since the age of nine. Among the trainings, the Blanket Skills<sup>3</sup> ("Tan Zi Gong" in Chinese) training is one of the most fundamental for Chinese dancers, which is a good example of the "extraordinary side" of the educational concept. I introduce the Blanket Skills and discuss their impacts to development of

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<sup>3</sup> Based on my research, there is not an official translation of the term. Baidu, the top search engine in China, translates it as "Blanket Kong Fu", which is not suitable in the context of ballet training. I decide to use the plain translation as "Blanket Skills".

dance career for the practicing Chinese students. I also discuss its advantages and disadvantages compared to the Vaganova teaching system.

After more than 60 years of development, Chinese ballet has formed its own unique training system. In 1954, Beijing Dance Academy was established as the first ballet school in China, with the help of Russian experts. This system has accepted the teaching system of Vaganova, and also integrated the unique element of certain basic training for Chinese traditional opera performers - Blanket Skills. Blanket Skills is one of the basic skills of Chinese traditional opera performances. It is a basic performance technique that should be mastered by traditional opera actors, dancers and many other performers. The Blanket Skills training refers to the training of actors and dancers for the skills of turning, jumping, bending, and flapping. It has the name as, in the old days when the training groups did not have mattress as we do now, the training took place on floors covered with blankets to avoid injury. Through the practice, the dancers' body movements are more coordinated and flexible, and their control of various movements can also be enhanced.

The Blanket Skills training for ballet dancers in China includes many technical movements that will not normally appear in the Western classical ballet training, such as bending over the waist, kicking back in big jump while bending upper body backwards, splitting in big jump, turning somersault, etc. In general, practicing Blankets Skills is a basic exercise for children before they are 10 years old. I use waist bending as an example to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this training.

Waist bending and keeping for three minutes is a daily practice for Chinese students taking professional ballet training. Please refer to picture below for a visual description.





(Image 2 available at [http://a0.att.hudong.com/82/76/01300001093852131108765768933\\_s.jpg](http://a0.att.hudong.com/82/76/01300001093852131108765768933_s.jpg), accessed: 04/08/18)

The benefits of this training are clear. It develops flexibility, and flexibility allows a dancer to have more room to dominate every part of the body, which becomes more malleable. In addition to flexibility, this training of waist bending develops explosive power and strength, which helps controlling the body. These benefits are significant, especially to certain dance moves, as the dancers will look smoother and not stiff. Chinese people emphasize the balance between strong and soft, which interpret the words “yin and yang” as they are often discussed in philosophy, literature and art. The same is true in dance, and are demonstrated through the balance between explosive power and flexibility. If you try to better represent the explosiveness, there has to be sufficient support, which is flexibility. In the Blanket Skills training, the flexibility of the waist is particularly emphasized. The so-called good middle section should have the quality that can be bend and straight, with both hard and soft aspects.

However, to a classical ballet dancer, the long-term bending and the "excessive" flexibility can chronically destroy spine, and, as a result, the shape. We all know that muscles memorize

selectively. As a result, dancers will have their most natural way of expression, by default, after long term training. This natural way is normally the default way where they feel also at ease. If bending is the kind of instinct that is formed under a long period of exercise, this instinct will inspire our dance moves to behave in a natural state. Over time, if bending is embodied in classical ballet movements, the back and waist will not be as straight and the lines not as beautiful. The result is not the imaginary choice of the dancer, but rather a subconscious physical response brought about by long-term training. This concerns me as a disadvantage of the Chinese ballet training. Personally, I had experienced a serious back injury when preparing for the Competition. While there were many factors that caused the injury, I suspect now that the two years of enhanced Blanket Skills training was at least a factor.

Traditional Chinese opera emphasizes discipline in training, including punishment, from the childhood, and the Chinese ballet training inherited that tradition. I remember stretching exercises for the 12 students in my class, as we lined up and held the long poles together, while at the same time split and bend back down together. We had to split and bend at the same pace for one minute. If anyone gives up midway, all students in the class were punished.

The core idea of China's Blanket Skills training is to dismantle the dance movements and train each move with the maximum intensity, over 100% as teachers describe, and refine them into micro-repeated exercises to achieve a highly accurate representation of the body and expression. This can be extremely challenging at the start. Since I was young and had relatively poor physical condition and flexibility when I just joined the SDS, I was often not able to do well during the basic Blanket Skills classes. As I did not breathe properly, I had blood congested eyes, bleeding and other injuries. I think that Chinese Blanket Skills work is a "double-edged sword." On the one hand, this type of military-like training from the young age helps build a solid foundation of skills and paves the way for future stage performances. After all, it is easier to achieve an action that is 100% perfect on the stage through practicing with over 100% intensity. On the other hand, such exorbitant training risks the aesthetics that dance should present. Please refer to picture below, showing an extreme bending of lower back.



(Image 3 available at [https://timgsa.baidu.com/timg?image&quality=80&size=b9999\\_10000&sec=1533392237729&di=75408360fe78a74aa9af0e7fcef9f143&imgtype=0&src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.tianlaiedu.com%2FUpFile%2Fimage%2F20160328%2F20160328144702\\_5002.jpg](https://timgsa.baidu.com/timg?image&quality=80&size=b9999_10000&sec=1533392237729&di=75408360fe78a74aa9af0e7fcef9f143&imgtype=0&src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.tianlaiedu.com%2FUpFile%2Fimage%2F20160328%2F20160328144702_5002.jpg), accessed: 04/08/18)

While some people may admire the superb flexibility and skills, I miss the symmetrical beauty that dance should have. As the moves were cut into static pieces, they don't flow as in a dance. I strongly believe that dance is not meant to be performed to purely satisfy the sensation of the audience, rather it should represent beauty. As a summary, dance for me has to balance between technical skills and the artistic representation.

Based on experiences and the discussion above, I draw conclusion to certain impacts, pros and cons, of the Blankets Skills training and the very strict method on ballet dancers.

- Comprehensive development: as the Blanket Skills training involves all-round development that trains both flexibility and explosive power at the same time.

- Personal strength highlight: this also involves identifying the strengths of each dancer based on their talent and physical conditions. As part of the Blanket Skills training, good teachers are able to identify individual strength and weakness, and give targeted training accordingly. For experienced teachers, it is a good practice to differentiate the training based on individual qualities. While working on the improvement of their weakness, identifying and further developing their strength is the way to develop top-notch dancers. This differentiated and strengthened training also helps grow a dancer's unique artistic styles.
- Risk of artistic expression underdevelopment: due to the human limitation, when one thing is over emphasized, there is the risk something else gets overlooked. Because Blanket Skills training puts so much emphasis on intensive training of the technical skills, there is the risk that the development of artistic expressions gets overlooked.

#### *Example 4: The Vaganova Method*

The Vaganova Method is one of the most recognized ballet technique and training system in the world. It is the core of the St. Petersburg (Mariinsky) school, and was devised by the Russian dancer and pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova (1879–1951). The Method combines elements of traditional French style from the romantic era with the athleticism and virtuosity of Italian technique, and established itself as a leading ballet training method. The training system targets to develop the whole body, with equal attention paid to the upper body, legs and feet.

The Vaganova ballet teaching system has strict standards and requires attention to the beauty of lines. A big jump that is high and straight is not enough, but should also represent symmetrical aesthetics. In addition, it values perfection rather than excess (as in the Blanket Skills), and this perfect balance between no shortage and no excess is very difficult to achieve. Because of this requirement of perfection, ballet dancers have to practice every day.

Based on my knowledge of the Vaganova Method and other Western ballet teaching, they do not have similar basic trainings as the Blanket Skills, actually certain trainings under the Blanket Skills, such as the waist bending, are not even thinkable under the Vaganova teaching system.



Image 4 available at <http://mariadoval.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/vaganova-ballet-academy-4.jpg>, accessed: 04/08/18

### *Reflection on the strict vs. facilitating approach*

I have experienced both the strict and the facilitating approaches, as I gained my basic training in China and the West. My training in China was strict in general. My observation is that the Western ballet basic training is generally subject to the individual's personal conditions, and, consequently, does not employ the stringent military-like training methods. I do appreciate there are merits with both systems. Like all forms of education and considering the perfectionist nature of ballet as a form of art, discipline is important. However a right balance between the very strict discipline and facilitating development is more desirable.

Reflecting on the Blanket Skills has been beneficial to my own teaching. Good ballet dancers must have both rich artistic connotations and superb technical skills. There is a reason why Blankets Skills training became part of the Chinese ballet system as discussed above. I think the training itself as well as the methods applied have their merits and can benefit the ballet teaching in Europe and other places as well. I have not and will not copy completely the

Blankets Skills training for my students at the KC in the Netherlands. However, I do reflect on the technical requirements of Blankets Skills training, and employ certain methods of stronger training as appropriate and on a selective basis. Based on the feedback so far, this kind of reference is well received and helpful to my teaching. Needless to say, each training and movement should be done at the right level based on the recipients, and taking the best of the Blanket Skills and the Vaganova teaching systems will be ideal, while not easy. I always keep in mind the fundamental ballet requirement from Vaganova of the symmetry and aesthetics of being tall, straight and positive, and hope to enlighten further with added training of explosive power and flexibility as in the Blanket Skills training.

### **B. Room for improvisation or self-expression**

In a strict learning environment, it is generally expected that the teachers give clear instruction, and the students follow them precisely. This approach has a clear benefit and produces solid performance by dancers with strong technique. There is a down side as well, as the students are not “pushed” on their creativity side, thus the result of performance can be neat, but may risk being viewed as not as interesting or expressive. Based on my observations and experiences, the more facilitating approach in the West encourages students to express. Yet, there is also the disadvantage of the lighter discipline.

#### ***Example 5: Observation of a preschool Chinese dance class***

I was recently invited to a preschool Chinese dance class in Shanghai. There were 10 students with an average age of six. The general style of the class was rigorous, normative and intense. Before the class started, the students also had a stretching session, mostly by themselves, which left me a strong impression and also reminded my own childhood training. I describe this stretching training below.

Precisely 30 minutes before the class, all students entered the dance classroom. They were well-coordinated and reminded each other of what to do, sat on the floor and split their legs for stretching. The entire process of stretching was divided into three stages, with each stage getting more difficult, and both legs rotated between the front and back sides.

Stage 1, basic stretching: the students split legs, with one at the front and one back. Both legs were required to lie flat on the floor, thus at 180 degrees with each other. This lasted for approximately two to three minutes, before the leg rotation for the same training.

Stage 2, progressive stretching: the students split legs as in Stage 1, however the front leg was raised to rest at above ground of 15 to 20 centimetres. As a result, the legs were at 210 degrees with each other. This lasted for approximately two to three minutes, before the leg rotation for the same training.

Stage 3, advanced stretching: the students split legs as in Stage 1, however the back leg was raised to rest at above ground of 15 to 20 centimetres. In addition, they bent the upper body backwards to hold the back legs. This lasted for approximately two to three minutes, subject to each individual's flexibility, before the leg rotation for the same training.

During this process of approximately 30 minutes, there was no speaking among the students. Once all students entered the classroom, they immediately settled and became serious with the training. It is worth mentioning that this stretching exercise was undertaken without the supervision of the teacher, as the students rotated to supervise their peers and reported the training results to the teacher at a later time. The whole process was organized, the pace was tight, and the classroom atmosphere was serious. It is hard to imagine this type of "military" training method in the Western countries. There were in fact a few parents present in the classroom to observe, and none tried to stop this seemingly cruel exercise but rather was quite supportive in attitude.

From a technical point of view, I think the training was successful. Majority of the students were able to complete the Stage 3 stretching, and some even completed with an enhanced degree of difficulty by placing the legs higher. It was very impressive to see these young children, with an average age of just six, perform the highly difficult training with such a strong discipline and being so demanding of themselves. I did leave the classroom with an open question though, while impressed, as to the pros and cons of this kind strict training for the children of young age. This comes back to the point that these students are highly disciplined, and completed their task so well, but they were not encouraged nor did they showed the desire to play and to express.

### *Example 6: Rehearsal with HNB under Hans van Manen*

I describe below a rehearsal that I had at the HNB under the famous Dutch choreography master Hans van Manen, for his work the *Five Tangos*, when he pushed dancers to be interesting and creative. While he is very inspiring during the rehearsal, the request for dancers to be interesting and creative is common with most mature choreographers. I describe this example to compare against Example 5.

The interpretation of the character should be wonderful; whilst the seemingly perfect mediocrity is rejected. Van Manen repeatedly emphasized during the rehearsal: I don't care how good and perfect the techniques are, but want you to catch the audience with a wow. I allow you to make minor changes to accomplish something skilful and unique in style, rather than dance precisely as you were told to. There has to be the fun part of the performance, which is what the audience wants.

The whole dance of *Five Tangos* has a strong sense of music and a clear sense of rhythm. It is easy to take the audience into the performance. Van Manen was very quiet during the rehearsal, just like a regular audience, and did not give any advice. Several times when the dancers made mistakes, the ballet master asked him whether to stop, and he shook his head to complete the dance. Only at the end of the rehearsal, did he explain that he felt it was not polite to interrupt the full-hearted performance of the dancers and the musicians, nor did he want to interrupt multiple times if there were other mistakes in the remaining performances. In addition, he wanted the dancers to learn to fix their mistakes on stage together with other dancers, the musician and the rest of the stage. After all, they had to deal with it if mistakes happened during the real stage performance. I find this approach of no interruption to be constructive. As a dancer, I find it difficult to be stopped when dancing with full energy, and I think the feeling and emotions on stage takes time to accumulate, and can be more difficult than the dance steps even, thus interrupting for starting again can be counterproductive.



### *Reflection on the two examples*

It is generally accepted that difference in education relates to difference in culture. “Chinese students rely on more external regulation of their learning processes and results. This is in line with Confucian Heritage Culture, where the teacher or lecturer strictly controls the learning environment and content, and is regarded as the font of all knowledge. In contrast Westerns are much more student centred, with the student having a large degree of control over their own learning, and the teacher regarded more as a facilitator than a teacher.” (Ken R. Levinsohn, (2007), ‘Culture Difference and Learning Styles of Chinese European Trades Students’, *Institute for Learning Styles Journal*, Volume 1, Fall 2007, pp.12 - 22) My observation supports this arguments, which was loosely demonstrated through Examples 5 and 6.

At different time and during different stages of my career development, I have experienced both of these cultures and the associated work-learning environments. As with most cultural differences, there is no right or wrong, nor good or bad. When giving classes at the KC, I found that the students had a higher independence and were stronger in learning capability. They were more active in asking questions and learning from each other. The general atmosphere was more relaxed compared to a Chinese ballet class, thus also less disciplined and not very rigorous. The competition among the students was lighter compared with the Chinese students as well. In general, I find the environment better for the student development. On the other side, I also feel it is important to maintain reasonable discipline, especially with the students of younger age, in order to establish the strong basics and good self-discipline. A solid foundation is important as it creates the room for future development.

### **C. Communication**

In addition to communication through speaking and writing, dancers communicate through contacts of bodies and eyes. It takes all forms, such as between a teacher and the students, among the students, between the dancers on stage and the audience, etc. Good communication among the dancers and with the audience can have a very positive impact to a performance.

“Experience has shown Chinese students do not tend to ask as many questions as Western students. In Chinese culture questioning may be seen to represent a challenge to the teacher.

However Chinese teachers assume the role of mentor and role model far more so than Western teachers. They interact with students after class in a more informal mode far more than their European counterparts. It would also be incorrect to assume that Chinese classes are entirely teacher centred. Student participation can include rapid fire questions by the teacher, answered by one student on behalf of the class while the other students participate by listening and tend to follow a sequence of Initiation, Response and Follow-up to reinforce the learning.” (Ken R. Levinsohn, (2007), ‘Culture Difference and Learning Styles of Chinese European Trades Students’, *Institute for Learning Styles Journal*, Volume 1, Fall 2007, pp.12 - 22) I had similar experiences. As can be seen in Examples 3 and 5, Chinese students respect their teachers and the discipline, and don’t ask many questions or challenge their teachers as a result. On the other hand, there is a stronger tradition for students in the West to ask questions in class. The students in the West tend to be more informal, and the teacher does not always position him or herself as the role model.

For dancers, one other very important form of communication is with the audience. The Example 7 is an example where the choreographer coached me on the eye communication with the audience during performance. I must explain first that the example was chosen to highlight the importance of communication, but not to understate the significance of eye communication in the Chinese performance. On the contrary, eye contact or eye communication with the audience is one of the most important trainings that traditional Chinese opera performers and the dancers of traditional Chinese dance must follow.

### *Example 7: Communication with audience*

Many people ask me the question: can you as a dancer see the audience from stage? I told them no. There was then the question: other than the bow and applause, is there any communication between the dancers and the audience? The answer is actually yes. There is a general belief among performing artists, including many fellow dancers and the musicians I know, that the audience does feel along the performers and enjoy more when they communicate, and, in turn, the performers also receive the positive energy from the audience and give better performances. It works like this: in order to reach the best level of visibility for the audience, the theatre lights switch off and only the stage lights stay on. From that moment, it is not possible for the dancers to see anything in the dark seats opposite, not to mention that they are most time in fast, complex and varied dance moves, or deep in the enjoyment of their danc-

ing. The question of communicating with the audience is always a difficult one. I received the coaching from Krzysztof Pastor, a choreographer, about eye communication with the audience when rehearsing his *Moving Rooms*, a contemporary ballet he had choreographed for the Dutch National Ballet. The coaching helped me to have a deeper understanding of the performance.

This contemporary ballet combines dance with a lot of lighting effects, in circles, stripes or squares, which plays the role of a stage setting. The dancers need to jump in and out of these constantly changing lights and perform a series of dance steps. I played a solo role, which was in the third part of the second section. I danced as part of a large group of dancers. Before the start of my solo section, all other dancers danced under their specific lighting effects. As their lighting effects gradually disappeared, they left one by one. In the end, I was the only one that stayed and continued to perform. At this time, the entire stage was dark except for one specific light on me. I jumped in and out between the light and darkness, and the visual effect of my body constantly switched between black and white. For me, switching between this strong contrast of light was challenging physically.

During the stage rehearsal, I felt dizzy several times, and, worse, the performance was not satisfactory. Certain rehearsal feedbacks include that my eyes did not focus and communicate. At the beginning, I thought that with the strong light and the dark surroundings, I couldn't see anything around. Krzysztof, the choreographer, talked to me and provided coaching. He first identified the causes of my dizziness and underperformance, which are the lack of focus of eyes, and the poor management of rhythm as I tried to move constantly without the right pauses.

He explained that all of the actions were meant for the audience. "Every time you finish a move, your eyes must be sharp and focused. Although you can't see anything, your eyes must reach the audience before the action erupts. In addition, the eyes must not look up, but rather sharply forward or even slightly down." This also applies to all dancers in general, and gives the audience a sense that the dancers are in communication, not just eye contact, but a general communication as well.

In addition to eye contact, there is a crucial point in managing the rhythm. Each move is designed to communicate a message, or the point, which can be either a move or an appropriate

pause. Appropriate pauses during the dance helps highlight the focus of the action for the benefit of the audience, and also helps the dancers prepare, breathe and divide steps.

I find the coaching helpful. After practicing with the eye contacts and managing the rhythm, I did not feel dizzy any more, had a better management of my moves, and the performance was very well received by the audience.

This experience where I learned the importance of eye contacts and managing the rhythm became actually very beneficial for my later dancing as well. The use of eye contacts with the audience and controlling rhythm are two very important skills of a good dance performance on top of strong techniques. Good use of them makes dance performance more attractive, while enhancing the dancer's personal appeal and stage dominance. These are very helpful to my dance career and the current dance education.

Example 7 is about the communication with the audience, which is among the many other forms of communication in our life. As a dancer it is a very valuable quality to deliver touching performances. In classroom, I also encourage my students to communicate openly, which is beneficial to their study.

#### **D. Focused technique vs. overall presentation**

Needless to say that strong technique is one of the most important qualities required of a ballet dancer or any dancer. There are, however, many other qualities that are important as well, such as beautiful lines of body, performing capability, etc... Only when a dancer has all these qualities, can he or she deliver a beautiful overall presentation.

Based on my own experience as a ballet student in China as well as my interaction with other Chinese dancers and teachers, ballet teaching in China has a very strong focus on the technique development, and in the West the teaching orientation is broader and values more the overall presentation, including performing.

### *Example 8: Coaching of the White Swan Pas de Deux from the Swan Lake*

*Swan Lake* is one of the most famous ballet works, and its White Swan Pas de Deux (“Pas de Deux”) is a highlight of the entire performance. This piece is highly challenging to dancers in terms of techniques, and also very dramatic involving delicate emotion and interaction between the Prince and Odette, the white swan.

I first learned this piece at the SDS in China. As I remember, the teaching focused on the technical side of legs and feet, etc., to highlight the superior individual performance. It did not ignore performance and other elements, but the focus of techniques was clear.

As I exposed to the Western way of ballet teaching and developed my dance career, I also appreciated more of the acting side of the piece. Again, it’s important to be technically strong and complete all moves as they are required, but it’s also very important to show the story and deliver the drama for the overall presentation. In my teaching to my students at the KC, I incorporated the strong technical requirements and also gave attention to the performance. My objective and requirement is that they deliver strong overall presentation, including both techniques and the drama performance.

The first half of the Pas de Deux is in general considered more interesting and challenging. I break this part into three sections for coaching: Section 1 is when the Prince first met Odette, and the depiction of their emotion during this time. This is the dramatic section and the key is to reflect the feeling and emotion in the dance moves. Section 2 is more technical as the Prince and Odette dance in duet. This section is technical, with challenging partnering requirements. My coaching of the section focuses the technical side. Section 3 is the climax of the piece. The overall atmosphere is active and exciting. There are not too many constraints on rehearsals.

I describe my coaching of Section 1 to my KC students as the example to show the importance of acting as part of a ballet work.

At first, it was difficult for the students to understand and become part of the plot, as it was a love story between a man and a figure that changes between a swan and a girl. Their presentation of the story was not accurate; in particular the special emotion between the Prince and

Odette. Their dance and moves were not synchronized with the mood and emotion as the story evolves. I coached base on experiences and my own understanding of the story and feeling as described further below. It was well received, and the students gave a good stage performance following that.

I started by explaining the background, and try to help the students get into how the Prince felt then. I told them that the Prince went to the “swan lake” with a hunting mood. In addition, I think he was in a complex mood standing in a group of swans: on the one hand, he felt lonely, as he could not find love in his country; on the other hand, in a group of beautiful swans, he was calm and relaxed without the interruption of others for a simple moment of enjoyment.

To make things more complicated, the swans changed to human images from time to time. As a result, the dance moves of the Prince to chases the swan / Odette is supposed to represent a confused feeling because he does not know whether it is a person or a swan. Because of this, he was surprised and shy when he first touched Odette as a person.

For Odette, the frequent opening and closing her arms or wings indicated her constant change between the swan and human, but at the same time also her changes of mood. The Prince desperately wanted to embrace her, but only when her wings closed completely to become a person. This was also the time when they accepted each other and closed the psychological distance.

When the students understood the story and the changes in mood, I also helped them apply these to the specific moves. For example, from the beginning of the Pas de Deux, the touching and teasing of Odette by the Prince was not firm but tentative. Odette responded in a similar manner. It was not until the beginning of the third quarter; the Prince followed Odette's arms and embraced her in full. In response, Odette did not struggle or try to leave, but accepted the Prince' love. Here, in order to highlight the joy when they finally come to this moment, I asked to see an emotional show of satisfaction of the Prince. As he immersed in this satisfaction, I expected to see his eyes closed in a fully enjoyment. Further, I also asked to think of this first embrace and that both their bodies shake slightly in response to each other's love.

To summarize and to help them appreciate the importance of diving into the story and feelings of their roles in future performances, I asked my students to always know the storyline well, and try to feel the roles of their emotion. It is only when they fully understand and put in similar emotion during the performance, that the role becomes alive.

This coaching was well received, and the students presented a good performance of the White Swan Pas de Deux.

### *The importance of the overall presentation*

The Pas de Deux is approximately eight minute long, and full of eye catching techniques as well as touching drama through the interactions between the Prince and Odette. As the performance is around the story of *Swan Lake*, presenting the characters as in the drama is fundamental. On the other hand, dance is the medium that delivers the story and attracts the audience. It's the dance that brings the exceptional beauty to the drama.

*Swan Lake* is one of the core pieces in the repertoire of all ballet companies, and a “must dance” for all ballet dancers. As I learned in China and the West, I appreciate more and more the importance and the close relationship between the dance and the acting, as they really do complement and promote each other. For my teaching, I endeavour to balance the development of the techniques and acting.

### **Training in Dance Technique**

While the general principle of technique training is the same for most schools, there are differences between teachers, schools, and between the Chinese and the Western teaching.

- a. Focus of technique development;
- b. Individual vs. partnering and group technique.

I discuss each of the two areas below.

## A. Technique development

Technique development is a focus and strength of the dance education in China. The strict approaches discussed earlier, such as the Blanket Skills and military like training, are designed to support the strong foundation for the technique development. For many, a good forum to confirm the success of the technique training is a competition, and winning prizes at major international competition is considered one of the strongest achievements.

### *Example 9: Coaching of La Sylphide by my Chinese teacher*

I won the second prize at the Prix de Lausanne ballet competition in 2003 through the performance of the James Variation of ballet *La Sylphide*. Below explains the difficulties and bottleneck that I experienced during the preparation, and how my teacher helped.

For background, there are many versions of *La Sylphide* and the James Variation. The version I prepared and performed was the one from American Ballet Theatre (“ABT”). The reason this version was chosen was that it is cheerful, showing off complex dance steps and gorgeous feet beating skills. As there are normally many good performances in a competition, a technically demanding piece generally stands out more.

I had two months of intensive training to prepare this piece, and found the repeating dull and tedious, and so was my performance. I became worried that this kind of stable but plain performance could not stand out in this world famous international competition. I struggled in particular regarding the last section, which I was hoping to shine. Normally the ballet variation is the essence of the entire ballet as it concentrates the highlights of the whole show, while the last section of the variation concentrates further it becomes the “essence of the essence”. I felt a strong need to breakthrough, as to how to interpret this last section and show off the techniques.

My teacher sensed my struggle and helped. He confirmed my understanding that this piece represents the climax of the ballet. It is divided into four small segments that repeat three times, and each small segment is divided into four steps. All segments and steps continue without any rest or interruption, and the energy accumulates like waves. However if they are presented as continuous big waves, there will be no visual surprise or climax. What's more, at



the end of the Variation, the body is already very loaded, and the physical strength and energy level have reached the limit. As this was made clear, he explained that the key is to allocate energy, highlight key points in conjunction with the rhythm of the music. The four-step technical allocation should be small-small-medium-large. This distribution works well with the unique joy of music, and pushes the dancer forward. There are also different focuses or highlight between the steps: the first focuses on shifting between steps; the second focuses on the upper body's agility; the third acts as the link between the second and the fourth, while accumulating energy; and the last, jeté, explodes into a climax. Further, these four segments repeat three times, and follow the same small-small-medium-large. During the repeating, the performance shows off the dancer's complex dance steps and gorgeous feet beating. Built on these segments, there is the final climax of speculator turns.

This way of interpreting the dance and planning between the music and steps helped my preparation and my final winning of the second prize at the competition.

Further, this experience helped me realize that not all dance movements need to be fully performed every time. For the audience, a performance with different levels of energy and presentation is more interesting and rich in personality. For the dancer, it is important to allocate the energy and perform in waves, so that he or she can deliver a demanding piece of dance that satisfies the audience with superb techniques.

### *Example 10: Coaching of La Sylphide by a Western teacher*

Compared to the Chinese teacher who coached every single movement, Western teachers tend to be more relaxed in their coaching in a more “free-range” kind of way. They are, however, more strict with enforcing the professional code. When preparing for *La Sylphide* for the Competition, as in Example 9, I also received the coaching from a Western teacher, which is described below as an interesting case showing different styles of the two teachers.

On the day before the competition, all the contestants got together for coaching and guidance provided by the Competition organizer. For the same variation that I had practiced many times under my Chinese teacher, it was a nice experience to work together with a different teacher of different perspective. I benefitted from the experience from both the technical coaching and other general advice for my later dance career.

The coaching session comprised of four dancers including myself, all from different countries and ballet education background. As most of the dance steps and postures are the identical, the communication and instruction was not an issue. For my choice of the ABT version, the teacher did not make many changes. Similarly, he kept most of the dance moves of the others. At the beginning, the teacher asked each of us to dance in turn, while those not dancing were asked to watch. I was the last one to dance. Prior to that, my teacher in China required me to keep practicing “even if the teacher is guiding others.” Thus I danced along the first dancer. The teacher looked at my practicing, but did not say anything. I did feel the uneasiness of the other two peers, and sensed their urge to follow as well. Before the second person started, the teacher called off my following. He told me that it was a performance natured rehearsal, and that my following might distract the dancer and audience. He also explained to me that I could learn and benefit from watching by practicing in mind, think how I could have done differently, which was also learning. I felt embarrassed, and realized he did not stop me earlier because he did not want to interrupt the first dancer. I felt guilty, and could not concentrate nor learn from the next two rehearsing. In the end, I did my best for my rehearsal, but was not in my best condition because of the earlier happening. I even had to dance twice the last section as a result.

After all four danced, the teacher asked each of us give feedback first about our own performance and then others. At that time, I was fairly weak with my English, thus gave most of my feedback through steps and dance moves. I had certain views of the others, for example I considered one’s to be under defined and too rough. However I did not give any negative feedback towards others, because it might be considered rude in the Chinese culture.

We then came to the second stage of rehearsal, where the teacher broke down and coached specific moves, for example how to feel and get the best effect of a big jump. Everyone worked hard when coached, and I tried to do my best as well when it was my turn. The anxiousness and pushing inside did not help, and I did worse than usual and even fell once. I became more nervous and uneasy, I tried to compensate by working harder and repeating the move I did not do well. On the contrary, the teacher did not focus on my technical shortfall, but explained the emotion side of the performance. He emphasized that the role should be happy at the scene, as a result, the dance moves should not be too restrictive and serious. He

also advised not to pay too much attention to the technical side, which should be presented naturally when it's the right feeling and when the muscles are not tense.

I did not quite understand it because it was different from how I was trained in Shanghai. All my previous teachings said I should have superior techniques, which would enable me to stand out in a competition. As a result, I did not follow the teacher to work on the performances, but continued on the techniques and repeating the turning that I did not do well. I was hoping for some tip from the teacher to improve. The teacher was not happy with my persistence. He stopped me and called me to the side to talk. He saw that I thought the technique was important, which is right, but the drama performance is equally if not more important. In the end, the dance was meant to deliver the story, rather than showing off techniques to conquer the audience. The teacher then stopped my rehearsal, because he felt that my technical part was quite mature, and that I should put more efforts to the performance and emotions. Although not in complete agreement, I accepted his decision.

After the rehearsal, I discussed with my teacher from the SDS. He advised that I should pay more attention to the techniques, even though he also agreed that I should relax and not be too nervous. I was in agreement with him, and felt that it was important to show off the techniques in a very short time to impress the jury. I did well the next day during the Competition, both in techniques, my strengths, and was not very nervous either, and won the second prize in the end.

### *Comparative analysis of Example 9 and 10*

Looking back, I am happy with my decision to pay more attention to the technical side at that time, which was a key factor in my winning the competition. I further attribute my later professional dance career to the competition prize and the study in Canada. On the other hand, especially after working with many large classical pieces, I also have a better understanding of the importance of performance in ballet. The performance is like a kind of bridge of communication between the audience and the dancers, through which the audience can feel the emotion and understand the drama. As discussed in Example 8, about the coaching of the *Swan Lake* Pas de Deux, the dance steps will only have the souls when presented with the right feeling and emotion. In this example, I discuss how teachers coach technique in the context of many other elements, including performance. Using the same piece, I compared

the different coaching styles between my Chinese teacher, who focused on the technical side, and a Western teacher, who tried to have me follow the professional code, relax and work on the performance.

I see strong merits in my career path: that I have received a strict technical training in China and built a strong foundation. After that, I could focus on other areas of development such as performance. Looking back, there were different areas of focus during the various stages of my education and development. Between the age of 10 and 15, it's the foundation and technique training. After that, it's the performance, the cultivation of personal charisma and stage experience development. This is logical as I became mature after the adolescence, and had better understanding of the story and roles. In addition, the strong techniques and the associated confidence helped.

This again supported the earlier discussion that there is not a single most correct way, but it is important to identify the situation and need, and choose accordingly.

## **B. Individual vs. Partnering and Group Technique**

Based on my experiences and observations, the Chinese dance education pays more attention to the individual technique compared with partnering and group technique, relative to the Western education. I have also heard similar comments that similar observations are made relating to music education, and as a result some young Chinese musicians find it difficult to fit in an orchestra because they are trained as soloists.

For dancers, partnering is one of the most fundamental techniques and qualities, as they are constantly dancing in groups, quartet, trio or duet. Good partnering enhances a piece tremendously, while bad partnering destroys or even causes injuries, even though the latter is exceptional and more common with amateur dancers. Having said that, having strong individual technique is important, which also serves as the foundation of further development including the partnering. Sometimes a very strong individual can help the weaker partner as well.

### ***Example 11: Performance saved by a sole individual in a difficult situation***

As a young student at the SDS (12 years of age), I observed the 6<sup>th</sup> China Tao Li Cup Dance Competition, which is the most recognized dance competition in China for the junior and youth groups. The subject performance is presented by a group from my school taking part in the group dance competition for Chinese dance. The piece lasted approximately 10 minutes, comprised of multiple pairs. The final part was a duet, which was the climax of the whole performance. There was an accident during the final duet, and one dancer got an ankle twisted when landing after a big jump. As a result, he could not complete together with the partner. Based on their recount later, they both were very nervous at the time, but decisive to complete the dance. In seconds, they communicated their choices through eyes, i.e. whether 1) the injured continued to stay on stage and gesture the moves; and 2) the injured left and the remaining one completed the dance. To get the best quality for the performance and the competition, they chose the second option. Also in seconds, the remaining dancer, Huang, now a celebrated dancer in China, decided how to make the performance less awkward with just one person. He chose a very radical approach by speeding up the dance steps, and performed both roles by himself. In the end, he performed his own moves, but also most of those of his partner. He made unusual changes, but the visual effect was quite powerful. This approach was very radical and risky, as technically it was almost not possible for him to break through the original dance moves for two. He was technically so strong that the performance was well received and they won the third prize.

This was a special success story, as Huang saved the whole performance by his own in a very difficult situation, all thanks to his superior individual technique. He received a star status at the school right away, and became an inspiration for other students including myself. This was one of the motivating story that I kept during my school days, and pushed myself to work hard on my own techniques.

### ***Example 12: Individual vs. Group Performance within rehearsal of Moving Rooms***

Again using the example of rehearsing *Moving Rooms*, this example discusses the conflict I, as a young dancer, experienced in how to balance between the individual and group performance, and how it was resolved.

My solo section within *Moving Rooms* lasts for approximately 1.5 minutes. At its end, other dancers get together around me. I am supposed to be like a magnet, and the others move close to me one by one. Unlike in many other dances, where the music rhythm and dance steps are closely integrated, it is difficult to count steps along the rhythm of music. Thus the rehearsal emphasized the coordination, or the running-in, among the dancers and with the music. The steps themselves are not complicated: four steps to the left, four steps forward, four steps to the right, and then the last step to turn and pose. These are repeated three times, with one dancer joining every move. The formation of the group will also change with the addition of dancers. Watching as an audience, the shape turns irregular as the choreography desires.

I had a simplistic idea at the start of the rehearsal: since all the others moved closer to me, all I had to do was to do my own moves. It turned out to be too simple and not working. The initial rehearsal was a mess, and the resulted visual effect was almost like a fight. At this time, an experienced dancer (“M”) stood up and began to direct the order of others entering. Importantly, she also pointed out that I should significantly reduce the range of my moves, so to have enough room for the others to join me. I was not happy with her suggestion, as I felt it was my opportunity to present myself on stage and that that the others should cooperate to support me to achieve this. I made a compromise, and completed my moves of four beats in two, hoping this would allow my own presentation and also create space for the others to join. The result was actually worse and chaotic like popcorn. Without giving away my opportunity to show off on stage, I tried together with others many different ways to match the rhythm and dance moves for nearly 45 minutes. Up to that moment, everyone reached the limit of physical strength, and M took the lead again and pointed out that all dancers made the efforts and repeated the same for such a long time without progress or even getting worse, and that the group should not compromise themselves and the quality of the entire performance for one person. At that point, the rehearsal ended without any further progress.

Before the rehearsal of the following day, M and I exchanged ideas. She confirmed it was not wrong that I want to express myself, but it was not smart to seek just self-expression within a larger group. “Imagine a duet, if the male dancer only thinks about how to show the most beautiful side of him, how he can ensure that the female dancer is properly supported and beautiful. That will turn each other into competitors on stage instead of partners. When you dance as a soloist, you need the others to help you. Making the other dancers part of your own performance is the superior approach. Try to reduce the range of your moves and then

feel the dance steps of other actors. Open the gate to them and let them fit in with you.” I understood and accepted her advice. Not surprisingly, everything went much better in the next rehearsal.

This was a good lesson for me and I learned two points: 1) it is not enough to do well by yourself on stage. Partnering and cooperation is a core quality for any good dancer; 2) a good dancer should have a mature mind, and be able to act beyond what’s requested by the teacher or choreographer to achieve the best result of a performance.



(Image 5: *Moving Rooms*; Source: Dutch National Ballet)

### *Comparative analysis between Example 11 and 12*

These two cases come from different angles: Example 11 is about the importance of superior individual technique and 12 about the importance of working in a group. They are both about achieving the best result of a performance. With 11, very strong individual technique and performance saved the whole performance under a difficult situation, which says a dancer needs to be strong and to be ready to show off when necessary. With 12, individual perfor-

mance is compromised for the best result of the entire performance, which says a good dancer needs to be able to analyse the situation and reduce the self-expression as appropriate.

I learned these two points at the different age and different stages of my career development. I am very pleased with my “strict” dance education in China, which gave a strong foundation and prepared me when opportunity arises. I am glad to learn the importance of cooperation at an early stage of my professional career. I believe being able to cooperate is a milestone in my becoming a mature ballet dancer. Both these benefitted me and my development tremendously.



## Conclusion

This paper is primarily a summary and reflection of my own experience, mostly from the perspective of a dance student and then a professional dancer. I also touched on certain experiences as a dance teacher, which is still a new field for me, thus they serve mostly as support for the discussions. Going through these experiences and writing them in this paper gave a good opportunity to look back. As a result, I regard it as a summary of my own dance career. It can also be used as a reference book, or as a food for thought for my future dance education work, and I hope it can serve the same purpose for others in dance education.

As part of this paper, I discuss a few areas of dance education, including motivation, approach of dance teaching and training in dance technique.

All dance students first have a destination to learn dancing, which can be the result of interest or external influence. Over the course of their dedicated studies, the interest gets developed or reinforced which forms the foundation of their motivation. Most time, the motivation initiated from interest is more sustainable; however the interest that is developed later can be equally strong.

Two general approaches of teaching are “strict” and “facilitating”. The former is more commonly observed in China, and latter more in the West. Within a strict environment, the students are in general more disciplined, good at following teachers’ instructions and do not challenge the teacher frequently. Within a facilitating environment, the students are more active in the learning process. It is generally accepted that the different approaches relate to cultural differences.

There are different schools of ballet teaching around the world, and their focus between the technique and overall presentation can vary slightly. This paper agrees that the focus can shift slightly depending on a student’s profile, age and phase of development. Also relating to the technique, a mature dancer should be able to show off own individual techniques or hold back for the group performance when necessary.

As discussed above, there are merits and disadvantages of the different approaches, and experienced teachers choose the right one according to the context and need. Similarly, there are differences between the Chinese and Western ballet education, however no superiority between each other. This is evidenced by the many good dancers produced by schools around the world.

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