

Negotiating cultural identity through autobiographic solos: Mui Cheuk-Yin's diary

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how choreographers in Hong Kong negotiate their personal and cultural identity through contemporary dance. Expanding anthropologist Melissa J. Brown's (2004) argument that identity is shaped by social experience, not culture and ancestry as is commonly claimed in political rhetoric, I use choreographer Mui Cheuk-Yin's work as an example, and discuss how social and cultural values have changed before and after the United Kingdom transferred its sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Mui, as a pioneer of modern dance in Hong Kong, started as a principal dancer in the Hong Kong Dance Company in 1981. After winning the Hong Kong Young Choreographer Competition, she received a scholarship in 1985 to study modern dance in New York. In 1986, Mui started her solo "Diary" project by exploring the form of dance theatre. From *Diary I – I was born in China...* to *Diary VI – Applause...* in 2009, Mui explored the history of her own dance career as well as that of the changing political and cultural environment in Hong Kong. With her successes in developing dance theatre in Asia, Mui was invited by Pina Bausch and Folkwang Tanzstudio to choreograph *Whispering Colour* and to perform as a guest dancer in *The Rite of Spring* with Tanztheater Wuppertal. Mui's work is internationally renowned for its organic movement vocabulary and unique way of using Chinese cultural elements. By examining Mui's solo work *Diary VI – Applause...*, this paper discusses the importance of autobiographic solo dance work and how Mui is a role model for young dance artists in the region. This paper also discusses the social changes, cultural values, migrations and complex identity issues in Hong Kong during the past 40 years, a period characterized by the shift from colonial to postcolonial – that is, before the return and after the return.

Keywords: cultural identity, Chineseness, migration, dance theatre

In this paper, I focus on how choreographers in Hong Kong negotiate their personal and cultural identity through contemporary dance. Expanding anthropologist Melissa J. Brown's argument in her book, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities*, that identity is shaped by social experience, and not culture and ancestry as is commonly claimed in political rhetoric, I use choreographer Mui Cheuk-Yin's work as an example, and discuss how social and cultural values have changed before and after the United Kingdom transferred its sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. By examining Mui's solo work *Diary VI – Applause...*, I address the importance of autobiographic solo dance works, and how Mui is a role model for young dance artists in the region. I also propose to look at Mui's autobiographic solos and her dancing body, which can be an archive of a group's collective memory. This paper also discusses the social changes, cultural values, migrations, and complex identity issues in Hong Kong during the past 40 years, a period characterized by the shift from colonial to postcolonial – that is, before the return and after the return.

As a pioneer of modern dance in Hong Kong, Mui Cheuk-Yin premiered her solo work *Diary VI – Applause...* at the Hong Kong Performing Arts Center¹ on November 5th, 2009. At the age of 50, Mui danced beautifully on stage and her story touched many people. Mui was born in Guangzhou, China, and later moved to Hong Kong, where she began studying Chinese classical, ethnic, and South Asian dance in 1973. In 1981, she joined the Hong Kong Dance Company and became the principal dancer, performing the major role in *Jade Love (Yu Ching Sao, 1986)*,² *Yellow Earth (Huang Tu Di, 1988)*,³ and *Rouge (Yen Zi Co, 1990)*.⁴ As a winner of the Young Choreographers Competition of the City Hong Kong, she received a scholarship in 1985 to study modern dance in New York. After returning to Hong Kong, Mui worked as a freelance choreographer, a dancer, and a teacher. In 1990, she was sponsored by the Asian Cultural Council to participate in the International Choreographers in Residence Program at the American Dance Festival, while also studying contact improvisation in New York. As a soloist, she has worked for numerous companies and was awarded the “Best Dancer of the Year” in 1991 by the Hong Kong Artists Guild.

As a choreographer, Mui started her solo “Diary Project” by exploring “dance theatre” in 1986. As Mui mentioned in her article, she watched Pina Bausch’s (1940-2009) *Café Müller* and *The Rite of Spring*, which would have a lasting impact on her own choreography (Mui, 2011). Since then, with Bausch’s influence, Mui has developed her own unique style of dance theater. With her great success in Asia, Mui was invited by Bausch to choreograph *Whispering Colour*⁵ (1998) for Folkwang Tanzstudio. Mui also performed as a guest dancer in *The Rite of Spring* with Tanztheatre Wuppertal in 1999.

Throughout the six series of her Diary project, including *I was born in China*,⁶ *I am a Dancer*,⁷ *Of Grandeur and Desolation*,⁸ *October Red*,⁹ and *Applause*, Mui shares her personal stories, life experiences, and memories. In her solos, Mui demonstrates the importance of the autobiographic solo and the possibilities for its execution. Mui presents detailed descriptions of her personal memories and inner voices. She also expresses strong personal feelings, a full range of emotions, unique characters, and stylized movement. In one of her solos, Mui describes how she, as a teenager, had to merge different cultures and identities when she moved with her family from China to Hong Kong. She also discusses her early dance training in a historical context, and describes how the Cultural Revolution in China affected many Chinese artists who were in Hong Kong at the time. These artists could not return to their hometowns in

¹ 《香港文化中心劇場》

² 《玉卿嫂》

³ 《黃土地》

⁴ 《胭脂扣》

⁵ 《花落知多少》

⁶ 《日記 I - 我出生於中國...》

⁷ 《日記 II - 我是舞者》

⁸ 《日記 III - 華麗與蒼涼》

⁹ 《日記 IV - 十月紅》

China, and with unstable and limited job opportunities, some of these Chinese artists even taught dance lessons to children for free. Mui's work¹⁰ is internationally renowned for its organic movement vocabulary and unique way of using Chinese cultural elements.

Before continuing the discussion of how Mui's autobiographic solo functions as an archive of collective memory, it is important to talk briefly about the colonial history of Hong Kong. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan, because of their geographic location and historical background, have intertwining political and economic relationships with China. Due to Hong Kong being colonized by the United Kingdom for more than 99 years and Taiwan being colonized by Japan for 50 years, both societies have developed post-colonial reactions and feelings for their former colonizer or colonial "motherland." From my personal experience, the older generations of Taiwanese, like my grandparents, were educated and are able to speak fluently in Japanese. Although they did not like the Japanese military occupation, they were nonetheless instilled with the values of the colonizer. They prefer Japanese food to Chinese and love products made in Japan. One cause of this post-colonial reaction might simply be a feeling of nostalgia for an earlier period. Sometimes this post-colonial reaction sets in even before the colonizers depart. In the case of Hong Kong, many Hong Kong residents who identified more with the United Kingdom sold their properties and emigrated there, or to other countries, such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, before Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, almost as if they were "escaping" Hong Kong. Such people were also afraid to lose the freedoms and political authority that they used to have.

In Benedict Anderson's analysis that theories, nations, and nationalist movements can all be imagined and created, he uses the example of newspapers (what he associates with "print-capitalism") in Western European countries. He explains that the proliferation of newspapers – along with the use of the specific languages – not only creates national cultures for Western countries, but also illustrates Western hegemony and imperialism in a global context. In Anderson's argument, the rise of print culture consolidated the European nation-state. Applying these ideas to China, one can see how the state discourse of multiculturalism, television broadcasting networks, and the official language, Mandarin, combine to perform the same function as Anderson's newspapers. According to Anderson, "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for modern nation" (Anderson, 1991, p. 46). Since the ethnic minority cultures have been authenticated and promoted by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the PRC government has tried to create a unified national culture, a unified sense of "community," and a unified identity of "Chineseness" for its people. The PRC government builds its national self-image through the reconstruction of a national multi-ethnic cultural identity.

¹⁰ Her major works include *Fragrant Garden*, *Water Music*, *E-motion*, *As Quick as Silver*, *Stories about Certain Women*, *Eulogy*, *la grace*, *Between Bow and String*, *Of Grandeur and Desolation*, *Kinetic Body Operatics*, *Pink Lily*, *October Red*, *Duet 3X*, *The Enigma of Desire – Dali vs Gala*, *Lot•us*, *Shui in Feng•Shui*, *Desperately Seeking Miss Blossom*, *Season N in Seasonal Syndromes*, and *The Tale of Miles in Triptych*. 《滿庭芳》、《水音》、《白描》、《水銀瀉》、《關於某些女人的故事》、《獨步》、《女相》、《弓弦之間》、《華麗與蒼涼》、《軀體亂彈》、《花葬》、《十月紅》、《3X2 體》、《情男色女-達利 vs 加拉》《流蓮歡》。

As sociology scholar Fu-Chang Wang wrote in a 2004 article, he agrees with Melissa Brown's assessment that:

Given the Chinese culturalist idea about what constitutes "Chinese" as a national identity, or "Han" as an ethnic identity, the leaders and people of China will never agree that Taiwan has evolved into a culture so different from the Chinese that it deserves a separate sovereignty. (Wang, 2004, p. 468)

However, it has been observed that although China clearly considers Hong Kong and Taiwan as under its umbrella of Chineseness, both culturally and politically, Taiwan, more so than Hong Kong, sees itself unique enough to be considered different from China. The idea to propose "Chinese" as a national identity or "Han" as an ethnic identity that is Chinese does not solve the identity issues for people in Taiwan or Hong Kong.

Although this intertwining political relationship between Taiwan and China is somewhat different from the relationship between Hong Kong and China, from Mui's *Diary I – I was born in China...* (1986) to her *Diary VI – Applause...* (2009), she has clearly demonstrated how she negotiates her own cultural identity before and after the United Kingdom transferred its sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Through dance, Mui has explored her own professional and performance history and that of the changing political and cultural environment in Hong Kong.

Applying Wang's idea to Hong Kong, the leaders and people of China will never agree that Hong Kong has evolved into a culture so different from the Chinese that it deserves a separate sovereignty. As a sort of compromise, the Chinese government has promised that it will keep the same political, social, and economic system for 50 years after 1997. In 2010, when I saw Mui's *Diary VI – Applause* at the 7th Guangdong Modern Dance Festival, a subtitle was added to the piece, reading "50, I think I can dance – Mui Cheuk Yin." This subtitle serves as a subtle dig at the Chinese government's political propaganda in regard to the 1997 Handover, or perhaps it was just a simple gesture by Mui to "remind" the Chinese government to keep its promise.

Mui decided to use *Diary VI – Applause* to honor Pina Bausch when she heard about Bausch's passing. In this production, Mui uses elements that she had used in the past. Pulling various solo works from different periods, such as *Awaking in a Dream*¹¹ and *Eulogy*,¹² she rearranged them into seven sections.

As the curtain is lifted, the dimly lit stage is filled with cardboard boxes, all the same brown color but of different sizes. The varying heights create a layered visual effect utilizing shadows and depth, and evoke a reasonably private space. Mui enters through stage left; she is petite with simple short hair, dressed in a black Mandarin dress and short black heels with a small fan in her hand. Walking on stage in a simple and repetitive pattern, accompanied by the occasional opening and closing of the fan, Mui restages *Awaking in a Dream*, a work that she

¹¹ 《遊園驚夢》

¹² 《獨步》

debuted in her 20s. Listening to the pre-recorded soliloquy in this quiet space, Mui's soft voice is peaceful, yet profoundly powerful in the darkness, as if it were coming from the depths of her heart:

To have danced from 20 to 50 – is it a blessing, or a destiny? If I can live my life all over once more, how do I want to live it? Is there something I really wanted to do but have not done? Someone I really wanted to meet but have not met? Or someone I really wanted to see again? Can I still do *Awaking in a Dream* for a number of years? I really want to do it, but somehow, it's not the same. It's my body, or my emotional state, this is no longer the same. And it'll never be the same again. So how should I dance it now? Would it be more suitable to dance it when I'm 60? And would there be ... can I go on stage still when I am 70, 80, 90? What kind of stage do I want? Who was it that said "life is but a stage"? (Mui, 2009)

In the backdrop, video footage of Mui dancing her *Awaking in a Dream* 28 years ago is shown, juxtaposed against her present movements on stage, a contrast that transcends time and space. Mui's movements echo her soliloquy, as if conversing with herself, answering the verbal questions of her mind with the physical movements of her body:

Can a 20-year-old body have a heart of a 50-year-old? Can a 50-year-old body feel like a 20-year-old? Is it better to have a 20-year-old body and a 50-year-old heart? Or a 50-year-old body and a 20-year-old heart? Since when have I begun to feel that I have the body of a 50-year-old? And what was it that I felt, and what is that I feel? If *Awaking from a Dream* is a story about waiting, how can I convey the feelings of waiting? Is waiting a time concept or a feeling of the heart? Waiting for someone, for a scent, for dawn, for love, for a break, for a dream, for a dream-come-true. (Mui, 2009)

Mui stands at stage left, gradually emptying the various boxes. Old shirts, pants, skirts, and shoes scatter the stage, as if fragments of memory were coming back through time and reappearing in the now. Mui changes out of her Mandarin dress and into a contemporary long sleeve cotton top and loose calf-length pants. She moves slowly to stage right and sits down in a chair. Her movements are slow, improvising with the chair and the space around her.

Continuing with her soliloquy, Mui says,

I remember the time I was first invited to perform in arts festivals in Europe in the early 1990's. People would ask, where are you from? Hong Kong. Ah, from Japan. No, it's not Japan, but a tiny spot at the southern tip of China. Then, as we drew nearer to 1997, people would say, Ah, Hong Kong! So it will soon be returned to China. After 1997, people now ask, How's everything in Hong Kong? How's the creative environment? How's this, how's that ... their voices filled with concern and curiosity. There's always a moment when a place or a person would be under spotlight. When the moment comes, are we ready yet? (Mui, 2009)

This soliloquy, from the section titled “The Long, Long Road,” shows how she, as a choreographer in Hong Kong, presents her own cultural identity on the global stage. In her work *Lot.us*,¹³ a long piece of yellow fabric tumbles along Mui’s feet as she gradually zigzags from the left back of the stage to the front. The long piece of fabric, seemingly endless, stretches along the stage as Mui frantically attempts to open it up with her feet and even her hands. It not only represents Mui’s long journey in dance, but also her endless struggle with political and artistic responsibility throughout that journey.

The section titled “Open Up” is about the age of a dancer, which is a rather sensitive issue. “The body” is the tool of a dancer. Some choose to use it to its fullest when they are young, but at the same time, they must learn to protect it as well. Mui speaks to the ups and downs of her physical conditioning, and thinks that it is at a better point right now than it was before. She says that in “Huangdi Neijing” (“The Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Internal Medicine”), the different periods of a woman’s age are measured in multiples of seven. The Menstrual period starts at around 14, while 35 is the peak of her physical condition, and 49 represents the important juncture at which her body begins to change. In dance, Mui says that she made her declaration with action. She believes in herself and presents herself in ways that best reflect her age. There is no need to disguise her age, as beauty is interpreted differently at each stage in life. Older dancers may not have youthful energy, but they compensate for that with depth and a certain intricacy of feeling.

The sixth section, *Eulogy*, is in memory of Bausch. When the white confetti dances on stage with each movement of Mui’s sweeping umbrella, the audience is transported back in time to that snowing afternoon. As Mui embraces her umbrella at the end and waltzes around the stage, footage of Bausch’s dancing waltz appears on the backdrop, as if both are dancing together through time, the staging bringing their minds together one last time.

As her soliloquy restarts, Mui says:

Over the years, every time ...I took part in international festivals, I could see artists from Taiwan, Korea, Japan, etc. followed by a huge backup team – arts agents, government cultural officers, reporters, etc. And every time I was there, I was alone. As I watched the others, surrounded by their huge team which bustled about, filled with excitement and an air of expectation, I was there, alone. An artist on delegation should be like a net thrown out into the sea. Cultural exchanges need planning, preparatory work, connections, and media reportage. The network is to prepare the way for future artists to be launched out there, for more talents to be exposed. But we have failed on all counts. Either the timing was bad, or we were just not good enough when the opportunity knocked. I have to say this, no matter what: we have missed the best of times! (Mui, 2009)

¹³ 《流蓮歡》

In *Applause*, Mui depicts the memories and stories of her generation in Hong Kong through her unique body language, presenting a physical autobiography. Her female dancing body clearly defines her identity and that of her generation. Many choreographers in Hong Kong have tried to find their own voices through dance, and Mui's Diary project is one of the most successful solos that expresses the specific postcolonial reactions of Hong Kong. Her dancing body has become an archive that represents a collective memory of people in Hong Kong for the past 40 years, especially the social changes before and after the changeover of sovereignty in 1997. As an internationally renowned artist, Mui's female dancing body clearly depicts the conflicts and struggles of her generation, and delves into an honest examination of the issues of marginalization, regional identification, and cultural identity. Mui's dance is rich in femininity and delicately Eastern. She has been invited to many international arts festivals,¹⁴ and was named "Dance Ambassador" (2000). She received the Hong Kong Dance Award in 2001, and was also named "Outstanding Woman" by Wai Yin Association. She was elected one of the Most Successful Women in 2005 by the magazine *Jessica*, and received the 2007 Chief Executive's Commendation for Community Service. As a hard working female choreographer and dancer, Mui's achievement in dance is as a great example for young people to look up to.



Mui Cheuk Yin (Photo by Leo Yu). All Rights Reserved.

¹⁴ It includes the Belgium International Arts Festival (1994), Re: Orient Dance Festival in London (1995), la Biennale du danse de Val-de-Marne (1997), Ein Fest in Wuppertal (1998), Venice Biennial Dance Festival (1999), Dancing-World Festival in Copenhagen (2000), the Lyon Biennale de la Danse (2000), Dance Biennale Tokyo (2002), and the Images of Asia Festival in Copenhagen (2003).

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