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Both sides now....dancing through life

One graduate student from Taiwan, now living in the U.S., describes how a shifting identity has informed her dancing in this storytelling excerpt from her MFA thesis

by Haihua Chiang

Dance has accompanied me through every stage of my life, shaping not only how I move but also how I understand myself and the world around me. From growing up in my mother's dance studio in Taiwan, to training in high school, moving alone to the United States at seventeen, and eventually pursuing professional opportunities and motherhood, my journey with dance has never been linear. As I reflect on my story, I see how my Taiwanese identity, my personal struggles, and my evolving goals have all intertwined with dance. It changed from something I barely noticed into a core part of who I am and what I want to pass on in the future. The reflections below move through memory and the body, tracing lived experiences in dance as a way of understanding identity, training, and cultural belonging.

A Dancing Childhood, Before It Was Mine

I grew up in my mother's dance studio, where I took ballet, and modern dance, but my main training was in Chinese dance (Chinese classical, minzu *wudao* Chinese folk dance, etc.), especially Chinese classical dance. This is a form which developed as a codified movement system modeled partly after Soviet ballet, becoming the foundational vocabulary for national dance dramas (Wilcox). At I grew up, I never took my dance training very seriously or considered dance as a career path. It often felt like I was in class simply because my mom owned the studio, and I had no idea how deeply my training in Chinese classical dance would influence me as a dance artist in the future. Still, surrounded by dancers of all ages, absorbing the discipline, artistry, and community that defined studio life, I was internalizing a way of life, one that laid the foundations for my future even before I consciously committed to it.

A big turning point happened in 9th grade, when I competed in a dance competition as a soloist in the contemporary modern category. Looking back, it's interesting that I chose modern instead of Chinese dance. I vividly recall the costume, the stage, and the backstage atmosphere. That was the first time I felt I was truly dancing for myself—building a character, creating a small world on stage. The competition went well, and for the first time, I gained confidence that maybe I was good at something, that I could be “seen.”

For the first time, I felt that I was dancing for myself, not because my mother expected me to, not because it was routine, but because I wanted to create a character and tell a story. The performance gave me confidence and, in a way, permission to see myself differently. When I received recognition at the competition, I realized I might actually be good at this. That competition was my “lightbulb” moment: the first time I truly believed dance could become something central in my future.

Expanding horizons in high school

Admission to my high school required an audition, and I was fortunate to attend the dance program at Zhong Zheng Senior High School. The curriculum was rich and diverse. We studied Chinese classical dance and martial arts, ballet and modern classes, with an emphasis on Graham technique. At the time, I did not yet understand why this particular technique held such a central place in our training; it was because of cultural exchanges during the Cold War era, when American modern dance companies toured to Taiwan under the auspices of the U.S. State Department (Lee, ii). These tours introduced Taiwanese audiences and dancers to American modern dance companies like ones named for Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, José Limón, and Alvin Ailey (Lee, ii). At this time, many young Taiwanese dancers decided to pursue further training in the United States, marking the beginning of a period in which American modern dance became a dominant influence within Taiwan's dance field (Chen, 325).

When I was in high school, my Graham training reshaped the way I experienced and understood my own body. Each exercise and correction carried not only physical demands but also ways of thinking and feeling through movement. I was too young to view dance through an internal lens; my focus was entirely on executing technique and becoming the best dancer I could be. Yet even then, the ability to think and feel through movement was already taking root in my body, shaping an embodied awareness that, although I didn't recognize it at the time, would continue to influence my artistic growth and later connect to my experience of studying dance in America.

My early dance education emphasized discipline, repetition, and technical precision far more than creative exploration. As a result, when improvisation was introduced during summer workshops, I experienced a deep sense of uncertainty. I had internalized a mindset in which movement needed clear structure and instruction, making it difficult to trust the body or let go of technique. I remember vividly the insecurity I felt when improvising—the uncertainty of not knowing what to do next, and the quiet pressure of having to create something from within myself. In one exercise, we were asked to respond to music without choreography, to let the body move instinctively rather than follow memorized steps. I remember standing still for a long moment, unsure how to begin, before a small movement—an arm reaching forward—started to grow, yet I still had no inspiration about what to do next. In the end, I copied what the teacher did to encourage us to move, and I remember feeling slightly disappointed in myself for not being able to improvise.

No matter how difficult my training was throughout high school in Taiwan, a sense of solidarity with my classmates gave it all meaning. For three years, we fifteen girls were inseparable: studying academics in the morning, then spending long afternoons in the studio together, often followed by late-night rehearsals. The intensity of our schedule created a rhythm that helped form not only my technique but also my identity as a young artist. We went through everything together, the long rehearsals, the exhaustion from repeating the same steps again and again, and the excitement of finally being on stage. Together we embodied the Chinese saying 苦中作樂 (kǔ zhōng zuò lè), which means finding joy in hardship. I think one valuable lesson I learned from this experience is the importance of teamwork, community, and collective resilience, the understanding that growth in dance, as in life, often emerges through shared effort and support.

What stands out most is how those years drilled into me the principle that “everything takes practice.” I experienced firsthand how daily repetition, no matter how exhausting, produces growth. My technique improved dramatically, but more importantly, I learned self-discipline and resilience. At that stage, I did not fully understand artistry. I was fixated on becoming “better” technically, but dance was already teaching me that if I wanted something, I had to earn it with effort, and once earned, it was mine to keep. This mindset later sustained me when I moved to the United States and trained independently, becoming one of the most important elements in the formation of my identity as a growing artist.

Crossing Oceans at Seventeen: A Shift in Training and Identity

In Taiwan, students who want to major in dance must audition individually for each university, much like the process in the United States. I attended several auditions at different schools in Taiwan whose programs interested me. After my last audition, my parents and I went to eat at McDonald’s. Looking back, it’s funny that we chose McDonald’s instead of one of our usual Taiwanese restaurants—perhaps it was a sign of what was to come. Over our meal, we casually talked about how the audition went and what I performed, when suddenly my mom, almost out of nowhere, asked, “How would you feel about going to America to study dance?” Honestly, I don’t remember exactly how I responded—whether I said yes, maybe, or even no.

I grew up in a Taiwanese family of artists. My mother majored in dance in university and later opened her own studio mainly trained students in Chinese dance as she taught Chinese dance, while my father studied fine arts at university and went on to build a successful career in advertising. They were not overly strict or conservative, but I often followed their instructions and expectations without question. So, when they offered me the opportunity to study abroad, I followed their suggestion, unaware of how profoundly it would change my life. In Taiwan, sending a child overseas to study dance was not a common choice, which makes me forever grateful to my parents for opening that door for me.

And so, at seventeen, I moved to America—alone, away from my family and friends, stepping into a world that would reshape not only my artistic path but also my sense of who I was. Moving to America was a leap into the unknown: the new environment, language, and culture left me feeling scared, lonely, and sometimes helpless. But when I walked into my first modern dance class at Citrus College in Glendora, California, I experienced a profound sense of relief. In that moment, dance truly felt like a universal language. Even though I was struggling with English, my body could still communicate. Within unfamiliar surroundings, I found a sense of belonging. Dance became my anchor. It was how I introduced myself to this new world and how I made sense of it. At Citrus, I expanded my training, taking ballet and modern as before, but also exploring new forms like jazz and tap. Performing in my first *Nutcracker* was a milestone, a way of entering into American dance traditions while carrying my own background with me.

Dance provided both familiarity and discovery. It was something I could control in a world that felt overwhelming, yet it also gave me fresh challenges and perspectives. Sometimes I sought comfort in Chinese dance, joining weekend classes in local community studios. But as my academic and dance commitments grew, I drifted away from Chinese dance until it became

something rare in my life. Looking back, I wonder why it was the first dance form I let go of, perhaps because it felt tied to home, and I was trying to carve out a new identity in this unfamiliar place.

I transferred to California State University, Long Beach to continue my dance studies in 2014, which marked a new level of seriousness. Surrounded by peers who had trained for years, I felt challenged, but also inspired. I threw myself into every opportunity, classes with dedicated professors, residencies with guest artists, and rehearsals that made me work harder than ever before. Dance during this phase was like a dream that I chased relentlessly. My goal was clear: to become a professional dancer in a company.

Modern dance became my home discipline. At CSULB, I had the privilege of studying under professors whose professional experiences deeply influenced my artistic growth. Keith Johnson, who danced with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company; Laurel Jenkins, formerly with Trisha Brown Dance Company; John Pennington, a longtime member of Bella Lewitzky Dance Company; and Rebecca Lemme, who danced with Luna Negra Dance Theater—all brought unique perspectives, rigor, and artistry into the studio. Along with many other amazing professors, guest teachers, and master classes, their rich knowledge of modern and postmodern dance helped me understand not only technique but also the artistry, intelligence, and humanity behind movement. Through their guidance, I learned that being a dancer meant more than performing steps—it was about embodying ideas, intention, and expression.

Studying under so many inspiring teachers not only refined my technique but also prepared me to face new artistic challenges with openness and curiosity. Their guidance helped me understand that dance was a dialogue between discipline and expression—a lesson that became especially clear when I was cast in *Of the Earth Far Below* by renowned choreographer Doug Varone, who served as a guest choreographer for a dance concert at CSULB. It was an almost 20-minute piece with multiple sections; most of the time, every dancer performed different choreography simultaneously. We had to listen to each other, watch each other, feel each other, and breathe together in order to move as one. Because it was a restaging of an existing work, we learned the choreography from one of the original cast members.

Doing the Varone piece, I wasn't just learning the movement, I was learning how to embody it more deeply. The process was mentally and physically intense, but also deeply rewarding; I would call it one of the most transformative pieces I have ever performed. Through this experience, I learned that a dance is like a beautifully intricate machine, with each dancer serving as an essential part of its function and artistry. If one part fails, the whole machine pauses. This realization taught me to see collaboration differently: success in dance comes not from one person alone, but from everyone working together as a whole. CSULB also introduced me to choreography and pedagogy. At the time, my focus was still on performance, but these classes quietly planted seeds. I learned how to build movement for others, how to communicate artistic ideas, and, because I got to teach occasionally, how to guide students safely through technique. These lessons would later become vital when my path shifted more toward teaching.

During this period, I let go of Chinese dance completely. My focus narrowed to modern, and in my drive to belong to the professional concert dance world, I distanced myself from the form

that had first shaped me. At that time, I saw modern and ballet as the dominant languages of the field I wanted to enter, and I felt an unspoken pressure to adapt—to move, look, and even think like the dancers around me. Chinese classical dance began to feel like something separate from this world, something I feared might make me appear different or less capable. Looking back, I wonder: what did Chinese dance mean to me at this stage, and why did I feel the need to let it go? I think I let go of Chinese dance because, at that time, I didn't yet understand how to hold on to it within a new cultural and artistic environment.

The movement language that once felt natural and connected to home suddenly seemed out of place in classrooms dominated by modern and ballet techniques. Surrounded by dancers who “spoke” a different movement vocabulary, I began to believe that success meant adapting to the aesthetics that were most recognized and celebrated. Part of me wanted to start over—to rebuild myself as a dancer who belonged in this new space. In that process, I quietly adopted a hierarchy of value—one that positioned Western forms as universal and Chinese dance as peripheral. Letting it go was not an act of rejection, but an unconscious response to wanting to belong, to prove that I could succeed in this new world. Only later did I realize that what I thought I had left behind was still quietly living in my body, waiting to be rediscovered.

After Graduation: Becoming professional

Graduation was a shock. Suddenly, the structure of school disappeared, replaced by visa challenges, financial pressures, and the uncertainty of auditions. For the first time, I questioned whether I had made the right choice in dedicating myself to dance, and I tried another kind of job, but I missed dance deeply. So, I pushed myself, continuing to train and grabbing every chance to dance I could find. Slowly, I found performance opportunities with companies and artists, including Keith Johnson/Dancers, The Assembly, Acts of Matter, choreographer Laurel Jenkins, and others, mainly in the modern dance world.

My experiences as a professional dancer taught me more than technique or performance; it taught me how to listen, interpret, and embody someone else's vision. Through years of performing, I learned how to deliver what a choreographer wanted, becoming a vessel for their stories. Working and collaborating with different choreographers allowed me to see how each person's creative process revealed something about who they were; I often felt I came to know them deeply just by dancing their work and sharing the rehearsal space. In performing, I was constantly telling other peoples' stories, and somewhere along the way, that planted a seed in me. I began to wonder—if one day I had the chance to tell my own story, what would I say, and what kind of choreographer or storyteller would I become?

During the years of the pandemic, I started teaching classes over Zoom, rehearsing virtually, and joining online creative discussions. I also spent hours watching streamed performances from companies around the world, revisiting Chinese dance works and discovering repertoires I had never seen before. Around that time, I was offered an opportunity to teach virtually for a performing arts school—an experience that not only challenged my adaptability as a teacher but also led me to reflect deeply on cross-cultural communication and the kind of educator I was becoming. Along the way, I occasionally ran into a teaching situation that reminded me I had been trained in Taiwan by teachers who demanded (and got) respect, whereas the American

dance studio often felt more casual. It made me reflect on how my teaching instincts—conditioned by my early training in Taiwan’s strict, disciplined environment—were still deeply rooted in me, even after nearly a decade of living, studying, and working in the United States. The experience reminded me that I was no longer teaching in Taiwan, and that part of my responsibility as an educator was learning how to respond to students professionally and *culturally* appropriately, finding a balance between the discipline I was raised with and the openness I learned in the American dance environment.

When I returned to dancing onstage after the pandemic, several things had shifted. As a dancer, I saw rehearsals not as a test of perfection but as a chance to rediscover nuance, patience, and breath. I also felt a new and exciting energy in teaching. I felt inspired by the students’ dedication and creativity, and the more I taught, the more I wanted to keep learning, to find new ways to connect, create, and grow both as an educator and as an artist. But perhaps the biggest change was becoming a mother in 2021, which reshaped my relationship with dance in ways I hadn’t expected.

What will I pass on to my daughter?

After giving birth, I struggled with postpartum depression, a loss of confidence, and a body that no longer felt like my own. Movements that once felt effortless now seemed foreign, and I feared that the dancer in me might have disappeared. It was also the first time I realized how much I had taken my body—and my dancing—for granted. Before pregnancy, I assumed my body would always be ready, always capable of carrying me through technique and performance. Motherhood shattered that assumption. My body felt fragile, unpredictable, and changed in ways I could not fully explain. However, as choreographer and scholar Ali Duffy writes in *Dancing Motherhood*:, “Motherhood is not an encumbrance; it is an experience to be mined. And it’s such a creative force... You have experienced creativity through your body. What more valuable experience could you have had as a dancer?” (Duffy, 80).

Duffy’s insight deeply resonates with me. Motherhood didn’t take away my creativity—it made my creativity expand and grow. It taught me that creativity doesn’t only happen in the studio, but through life itself. When my daughter was three, I decided to enter an MFA program and I had the chance to take technique class and train regularly again. As Duffy notes, many dancers experience a process of “recalibrating to postpartum changes in their dancing bodies,” often confronting “a loss of strength, a changed relationship with pelvic floor muscles, and decreased cardiovascular endurance” (Duffy, 74). I had to relearn how to move, to rediscover the muscles that once worked instinctively. This process humbled me but also made me more compassionate—toward myself and toward others. I no longer hid my physical limitations; instead, I began to talk openly about recovery, fragility, and change, recognizing that vulnerability can be part of strength.

Motherhood also brought my Taiwanese identity into sharper focus. Raising my daughter in America made me think deeply about what parts of my culture I want her to know and carry within her. Dance, especially Chinese classical dance, became part of that reflection. As Anthony Shay notes in *Choreographing Identities: Folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival in the United States and Canada*, “specific dance forms, particularly traditional dance genres, often serve as one of

the means that individuals utilize for the construction of ethnic identity” (Shay, 56). In the context of diaspora, dance becomes more than movement—it is a way to rebuild and reaffirm cultural belonging. Returning to Chinese classical dance allowed me to embody my heritage while reimagining what it means within my life in America. I began to see that preserving and sharing my cultural heritage is not just about my artistry but also about what I can pass on to my daughter—a sense of where she comes from, even as she grows up in a different cultural landscape.

In this way, motherhood became a turning point. It forced me to reflect on who I was, what I had inherited, and what I wanted to give. Dance, though distant, was not gone—it was waiting for me to rediscover it in a new form. More than ever, I began to understand that dance is not only about technique and stamina but also about humanity, vulnerability, and identity.

As I pursued my MFA, I came to see dance with new eyes. It was no longer only about chasing a dream of performance; it became a space for growth, contribution, and exploration. Dance has evolved alongside me, from a childhood activity, to an aspiration, to a profession, to a responsibility—and now, to a lifelong practice of learning. I have come to understand my thesis research not as a fixed destination, but as a process of relearning and rediscovering myself: as a person, as an artist, and as a dance-maker.

Deciding to return to school was not an easy choice. It meant reshaping my path once again—not only as a dancer and teacher, but also as a wife and a mother. Yet from my first quarter at UCI, I knew it was the right decision, and the right moment. I arrived with a different kind of readiness: more grounded, more reflective, and with a deeper sense of what I could offer. The MFA program provided a platform that encouraged—and at times demanded—this kind of questioning. Through classes, choreographic opportunities, collaborations, and conversations with faculty and peers, I was continually asked to reflect: Why do I dance? Why do I teach? Why do I make art, and what kind of dance do I want to make now? Dancing alongside undergraduate students and engaging with their curiosity and urgency was unexpectedly inspiring, reminding me that learning is not linear but cyclical.

Creatively, this period prompted me to slow down and critically reassess my artistic voice—how my movement choices, values, and interests had been informed by years of performing, teaching, migration, and motherhood. I began to ask what kind of artist I am today, what experiences live in my body, and what stories feel necessary to tell. These reflections gradually led to a clearer artistic direction—one that acknowledges my training in modern dance while also reconnecting with my Taiwanese cultural background and lived experiences across borders. These questions, experiences, and realizations ultimately led to my thesis project, “Both Sides Now: a choreographic and research-based exploration of artistic identity as a Taiwanese modern dancer in the United States.”

Haihua Chiang graduated with an MFA from the University of California, Irvine in June 2026.

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