

My Story ~ 4. I Remain A Typical Chinese Person



“An Australian passport in my hand for eighteen years, but I still do not feel and will never be a real Australian.”

My hometown is Qujing, a small city in the east of Yunnan Province. Back when I was still in China, Qujing was different from the west part of Yunnan, there were only several minorities. Yang Liping, a well-known minority dancer whose Peacock Dance has won top praise of the world was born in Yunnan too. Well, I majored in dancing and during the past years, all my work has been closely related to dancing.

Talking about my experience of Australia, I think it's quite interesting: the first time we came here as tourists. In 1996 when my husband and I were living in Africa with our eldest son, we made a trip to Australia and the first stop was Perth. The moment we arrived, we called a taxi and asked the driver to take us to a hotel in the city, and then there we were - Holiday Inn in the downtown area. We got up quite early to eat breakfast and my elder son (my little son hadn't been born then) would sit beside the breakfast table reading. Suddenly, he said to us with excitement: "Look here, a migration agent, why don't we move here and live in Australia while we are here can complete the immigration procedure?" I considered a while and replied, "Well, why not." When my husband called the migration office, an old western lady answered the phone. She came to find us and took us to the Kings Park and Swan River where we saw black swans and walked along the river. I was quite amazed by the beauty of the small city, quiet and tiny, with no Chinese. She told us that there was no Chinatown, only several shops run by Vietnamese. (Northbridge was not Chinatown at that time.)

I fell in love with this peaceful city and said to my husband, "Let's move here!" He agreed with me and we signed a contract with that nice old migration lady. Back to the hotel, we remitted ten thousand dollars to her and flew back to Africa.

However, I regretted the moment when we were back home, yes, what was I thinking about? What could I do in Australia with no relatives and friends there? My pregnancy with our little son increased my anxiety. After my husband's call to that lady, we found that if we cancelled we would only be refunded part of our money due to the contract. Well, we had to go on. The procedure was actually quite easy at that time and only two months later, we were told that everything was okay and we could go there. My mother lived with me at the time, so I asked her to come to Australia with my son. I would move after my baby was born.

Perth is so beautiful and clean which is just what I love. It's like living in the peaceful country with several families around. In fact, I've been to many places like Sydney, Melbourne and London et cetera. But I only like Perth. It's weird but only because wherever you are, people around you are nice and friendly and of course the old lady in the office impressed me most. She was so hospitable that the first time we met, she took us around. And after my son came, she even offered to help arrange school. My mom knows little English so she found her a Hong Kongese at a restaurant as translator. If my mom went shopping, locals would offer to assist her. With all the memories in mind, I know I'm okay in Perth.

Well, frankly speaking, we did encounter a lot of difficulties when our lives started here; the most serious one was language, especially in daily life. For four years in Africa, I'd never learned English but now, even a small store run by Chinese is full of Cantonese. I was sad and cried to my friends in China, telling them my failure to communicate with other people. What I have to learn now are both English and Cantonese. Well, I still know little of Cantonese.

Having lived in Perth for quite a while with no work to do, I found myself bored and depressed, but my previous working experience was just teaching dance. There were only three Chinese schools in Perth at that time, all belonging to the Chinese Benevolent Association. So I went to James Street where the Association was located and asked for a job teaching dance in Chinese schools. It turned out that teachers were not required. Then I turned to some friends, including where my son was studying, all with no result and I had to give up. Then came a chance with the return of Hong Kong in 1997, the Chinese people wanted to hold a parade and invited me to dance. Away from the stage for such a long time, I was quite happy to dance again. However, this time, the platform was just a big table in the street. No music, no lighting and no sound system. I had to prepare everything I needed by myself which did puzzle me a lot. Well, I had another chance to dance at The University of Western Australia and had to prepare

myself, music and costume. Yes, I even ended up calling friends in China to send me a Peacock costume.

After several performances, the Association came to me and asked me to work as a dance teacher for their dance troupe. I was glad to oblige. The students would practise for two hours according to my direction, one for basic skills and the other one for dance; this met disagreement from their manager, telling me that they had never practised the so-called basic skills in past years. Upon my insistence, they agreed in the end; however, after the first class a problem came - I was too hard on them.

I taught dancing in Africa and was quite strict. I asked students to practise according to ballet requirements, which met rejection here. I remember that a mother of a student named Jenny called me and said: "Well, you can't do this because it would hurt. You can't teach in your Chinese way!" I insisted that if they didn't have basic skills, I wouldn't teach any more. Co-ordination brought success. So now I have taught for the Association for 17 long years.

What I do here is mostly related to dance. When I think it over in my spare time, maybe I would have been a stage director like some of my friends if I hadn't moved abroad. But I have never regretted this rich experience here. What impressed me most was that I was invited to a Chinese school on Christmas Island for the big 50th anniversary. I stayed on this small and beautiful island for two weeks. Teachers there were mostly Brunei or Malaysian Chinese. Quite unexpectedly, I met a volunteer teacher sent there by the Chinese government. She had been teaching for two years with no payment. I was shocked and moved at once - spreading Chinese culture in such a lonely place with no payment, what a spirit! I danced two songs and choreographed for them, contributing to the cheerful atmosphere.

Time flies: I've been Australia for 18 years and I have witnessed the effect of China's growing power. People around the world are getting to know more and more about China. In contrast, when I first came to Perth, there were few Chinese people in Northbridge and no one could speak Chinese. The few Chinese people could only speak Cantonese and wherever I went, people asked me whether I came from Japan or Taiwan. They wouldn't believe me that I actually came from the mainland: "It's impossible, how can a mainlander be here!" Why not! Then I would begin to explain to them that China is not like what they thought. Most of them hadn't been to China; they thought of China as a poor and backward country

where women wear foot binding, which really made me angry. "Oh my god, that was a hundred years ago! Why don't you go and watch TV and find out what China is like today!" Well, things are different now. Local people will talk to you about Beijing, Shanghai, and they know cities in China are quite beautiful because many of them have been there, including my neighbours. It makes me satisfied about the great changes in the past years. More and more foreign people go to China and more and more Chinese come to Australia, which inevitably deepens the impressions and knowledge of the countries. I know this has to do with our national power and enhanced international standing. People will say "it's Chinese" but not "Japanese" for "Taiwanese" and I hear more and more Chinese being spoken and find more and more Chinese restaurants. The last time I went to Canning vale, people I met there were all Chinese. I even had an illusion that I was in China - everyone, including coffee and vegetable sellers all spoke Chinese.

Of course I have changed a lot along with my country. I now own a dance school which I founded, but it's just a hobby, not something to live on, so that I can get together with my artist friends. Besides, we can have our own small theatre and don't have to pay expensive rent. As for the future, I'm planning a more formal and decent ensemble, collecting friends who can sing, dance and play instruments. Actually I have thought about it for quite a long time and discussed it with some friends. I know it's not easy but I think there are two different things in performing art and living in Australia. In China, what you have to do is just to think and write it out, submit it to the government who will then approve and fund you, while in Australia; you have to find yourself sponsors. No financial support, no money.

People once asked me about the difficulty of living in Australia. Well, I think as long as you are willing to strive, you will make it. Take my students for example; their work covers all fields: nurses, doctors, floor layers, cleaners, restaurant owners and beauticians - the only problem is to find a job to do or a major to study, and then you can survive. One of my students born after 1990 in the mainland majored in mining. However, he doesn't want use his major because of the hard work in mining. Currently, he is selling Shiseido in Myer at Carousel, sometimes he also works in the Casino restaurant. When I ask about his situation, he replies that it's okay and he's actually paid a reasonable salary, thus he survives in Australia.

Communication here is not hard either. Australia, from my perspective, is a

multicultural country. It has no unique identity except what originates from Aboriginal people. I have little connection with local commercial or political organizations but mainly artists. The Dancers Association will host performances now and then and is granted funding. This performance is just like a multiculturalism research topic. For example, once the director collected several people from different countries, including Africa, England, Spain and others: people with different nationalities, cultural backgrounds and speaking different languages formed a cultural collaboration. I also made a stage play on behalf of China in 2008 to express this cultural collaboration in the form of dance. During this performance, I felt no discrimination or miscommunication at all.

I was once asked that after living in Australia for so many years, do you feel yourself Australian or Chinese? Well, actually, I think the answer is quite clear: I'm more Chinese than the Chinese! Maybe that's something to do with culture. What I learnt back in China is Chinese dancing and knew more about Chinese culture than others, so deep down I'm Chinese and wherever I go or whatever I do, I'm a Chinese and never Australian. Although I'm a member of the Western Australia Dancers Association, I show up as a Chinese and represent China when attending annual Australian National Day and other performances. Frankly speaking, I'm puzzled too. Having been living in Australia all these years, I have never treated myself as Australian. Even with an Australian passport in my hand for eighteen years, I'm not and will never be an Australian.

Sometimes when I'm alone, I actually feel pity for us immigrants because we don't know where we belong. Or where we should stay when we are old? Some say they will definitely go back to China where they can do whatever they want, while others are going to stay on both sides. I'm sure that I have never looked on Australia as home and a place to stay after getting old. But I don't think it's possible for me to go back to China because we have no house and no feeling of home. Maybe I can stay with my brother, but in spite of the fact that they are good to us, it's not my own place. Too many things are different from what I'm familiar with so that it's a little hard for me to fit in.

Now, with our little son going to University, I'm thinking of travelling around the world a bit before I'm too old. I envy my students because they are so young and I often tell them to travel. Dance in the street on the other side of the world and earn money while traveling the world at the same time.