

Re:Vive

by

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## ABSTRACT

Re:Vive is a written reflection, exploring the creation of a series of dance films, 迷 / MI, 痕 / HEN, and 寻 / XUN. It presents a journey of digesting the discomforts and unfamiliarity caused by the pandemic in 2020. The ideas behind these works are centered on storytelling, embodied reflection, and the application and development of creative choreography tools. By using experimental video art, dance movement, media design, hybrid event production, and the mixing of elements, I, as a movement artist, am experimenting with embodied ways to creatively inquire about my discomfort and create a new whole in order to record and communicate these ideas.

## DEDICATION

I dedicated this work to my uncle who passed away during the pandemic. I wish you rest in a pleasant place full of fresh air, peace, and our loves.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would love to share my gratitude in the following five parts.

First, I want to thank my family members for their generous love and support throughout my life. My grandparents, thank you for taking care of me when I was a child and raised me up. Mom and Dad, I am grateful for you believing in me and encouraging me to take on this journey as a dance artist. My fiancé, Ziyang Fan, I would not finish this project without your encouragement. Thank you for your listening ears, your ability to keep me calm and showing me what unconditional love really is.

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## PROLOGUE

Dear people who may be interested,

This is what it was like

It started with a little concern

and then it was a little bit hard to process

All my fingers curl up like a fist

I was trying to hit but all in the air

All my anxiety was concentrated in my chest

I was trying to scream but people can barely hear

I don't know how to deal with it

I put on a mask

distance from this unusual change

inhale

exhale

inhale

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

January 23rd, 2020, I was at Tempe, Arizona when Wuhan and most of the cities in China were locked down. Friends around me generously expressed their care and best wishes, which indeed eased the intensity of my concern for my family and country. However, the large situation around the world was intense and getting worse. An increasing number of Chinese students as well as Chinese expatriates were experiencing varying degrees of racial discrimination in their localities. Some of them were called “virus spreaders” and “diseased bitches” by neighbors. Some of them were beaten and even pushed off the subway. I also received several strange gazes on the street.

Meanwhile, many international media outlets was posting biased reports linking the virus to race and politics on their platforms. On January 27th, 2020, Jyllands-Posten, a Danish newspaper posted a controversial cartoon. The author replaced the five stars on the Chinese national flag with the image of viruses. On February 3rd, 2020, Wall Street Journal published an article titled “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia”, written by Walter Russell Mead. These negative news articles, and the daily increase in the number of diagnoses in China made me feel very depressed and helpless while living in a foreign country. This was my very first time experiencing those complicated feelings at the same time. I felt as if I was in a whirlpool, as if at any moment I will be sucked into the abyss or covered by the next wave.

Faced with the emotions and environment that were gradually becoming unfamiliar, I did not know how to deal with it. Fortunately, I was not alone. More and more Chinese students started collecting and reporting stories of racial discrimination on their official

WeChat accounts. University Student Unions across the country had also taken action to help students who had been discriminated against in order to defend their rights and actively appeal to friends around them to be rational about the virus. A student in Italy started a "Hug Me" campaign at a local plaza, which was also copied by the Arizona State University Chinese Student Union in front of Memorial Union. I was deeply moved by the courage and cohesion they expressed. I began to think as a choreographer: "What contributions can I make to the current situation?"

In a conversation with Liz Lerman, my committee member, she mentioned that it was a good opportunity for me to record my discomfort. In her book, *Hiking the Horizontal*, Lerman wrote a chapter discussing "Seven Paths to Creativity." One of the paths she pointed out is: "Turning the discomfort to an inquiry... Saying no is a wonderful moment of learning if we understand how to mine our uncomfortableness (Lerman 239). I felt this quote found me at the right time and the right moment. It not only strengthened my determination to complete my first creative inquiry work 迷 / MI but also led me on a journey to kinesthetically record and investigate my "uncomfortableness" as an approach to deal with the unfamiliarity of the pandemic.

Overall, I am interested in researching how somatic-based narrative research and the autoethnographic telematic dance-making process can serve as a methodology in transforming COVID-19 related confusions and uncomfortable situations to internal reconciliation and self/community development resources. I am curious about whether this methodology will benefit people in constantly evolving conditions and provide the ability to adapt and become resilient to change and transformation. A series of works will be

shown and streamed to live audiences, which involves a video installation with pre-recorded screen dances and a telematic live dance performance.

### **Purpose of Research**

As a movement artist, I believe that dance can be used as a tool for self-discovery, which has transformative potential for the development of self. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to find closure or reconciliation through a deeper understanding of the relationships between me and my experience in the pandemic and how this relationship has dynamically shaped me. What's more, I am curious about how the uncomfortable experience caused by pandemic can transform into inner strength resources for me to face the uncertainty and fear that may happen in the future. As an autoethnographic work, this research drew primarily from my own life experiences and through artist collaborations, the experiences of others who were in the same liminal stage. Using reflective exploration through writing reflective journaling, drawing, along with movement improvisation, creative toolbox implementation and choreographic processes, my study seeks to understand the fear and unfamiliarity that arises from the uncertainty of life during the pandemic. Further, my research investigates methods to transform confusions and uncomfortable situations into self as well as community development resources.

### **Putting into Context**

In the Spring of 2020, my research was shifting as my intuition following the large context of the pandemic gradually encouraged me to constantly re-position myself as a learner and choreographer. I had spent the last two years in graduate school gaining somatic and creative knowledge, as well as experimenting with methods to transform from a dancer who was dancing for others to a choreographer who is willing to express my own voice. I

was ready to apply knowledge that dance taught me and expand into new ways of thinking and operating in the world. With the outbreak of the epidemic, part of the loopholes in the world's current state of operation had been exposed. In response to the laying bare of the workings of the global economy, an Indian author, Arundhati Roy has suggested that we envision the pandemic as a portal—a liminal space that we are moving through on our way to another world (Roy). Roy's word choice of "liminal space" reminds me of the term 'liminality' and how it relates to the work of Victor Turner and performance studies theory, which inspired me to think about how dance can contribute to the transformation process.

Liminality is derived from the Latin "limen," which means the threshold. It is a space in between two different stages. This term was first introduced by a French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, who in 1909 wrote *The Rite of Passage*. In this book, Gennep said that all initiation rites of passage from purity to adulthood, from having the power to giving up power, from death to the afterlife have three phases: separation, the liminal phase, and reintegration. This has a huge influence on the work of Victor Turner and his performance studies theory. The world of theory is derived from the regressive phase of social drama which often involves ritualized processes. Turner believed that liminality is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage. He described this as a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, and a gestation process. It is the liminal phase of rituals that provide a model for social change.

Turner indicated that anthropology of experience finds that sources of aesthetic form, including stage drama and dance, continuously appear in certain recurrent forms of social experience. The performance arts are ritual's progeny, derived from the subjunctive, liminal, reflective, and exploratory heart of social drama where the contents of group

experiences are replicated, dismembered, refashioned, and mutely or vocally made meaningful. For instance, if you want to change the power and dominance relationship, you need to change your performance. It is the performance stage that offers the place for those people who want to change to present different possibilities. In this case, the social transformative function of the performance mentioned in Victor Turner and his performance studies theory in relation to liminality can serve as a gateway to the other world that Roy mentioned.

However, what world is it? And what world do people want it to be? As a dance practitioner, what can dance do in response and how can it help? As a partial response to these questions, dance scholar, Susan Leigh Foster, proposed a practice that she is calling “Relationing or Building Relationality” at Beijing Dance Academy Dance Forum 2020. She defines this as a practice of building trusted connections across diversity. Foster pointed out that the epidemic has almost halted communication, but it also shows that humans have such a high degree of connection and dependence on each other, and it also highlights many unfair phenomena among races which provide dance educators with an opportunity to observe and reflect closely. She envisions “Relationing or Building Relationality” as a way to work toward greater social and ecological justice. Embracing diversity and building trusted connections are the two key elements of this practice.

I agree with what Foster said about the impact of the epidemic on relationships and the need for a more inclusive relationship that embraces diversity and trust. The confusion about relationships related to race and the psychological impact of the termination of communication were also important factors that influenced my creation of the entire work. Foster's proposal on Relationing or Building Relationality also affirmed the ability of dance

to contribute to the establishment of such a relationship, which has a guiding significance for my research. Foster indicated that: “dance is an activity that could build relationality exceedingly well. We dance with people and dance for people. Both those actions contain the potential to build connections across diversity. Choreography can be seen as a plan for moving into relationality with others and with one’s surroundings. Learning to dance from someone or with someone likewise instills multiple forms of awareness about who one is as a body in relation to others’ bodies” (Foster). However, I think the establishment of a relationship is two-way, which includes both inward exploration and outward expansion. In terms of my own experience with the epidemic, my research is biased towards how people maintain good relationships with themselves while they are in quarantine, but also includes an exploration of how this benefits their connection-building with the outside world.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE INQUIRY PROCESS AND ANALYSIS

#### Part I: 迷 / MI

*“Ebola is not an African virus, H1N1 is not a Mexican virus, and the coronavirus is not a Chinese Virus. --Ziqian Zhou”*

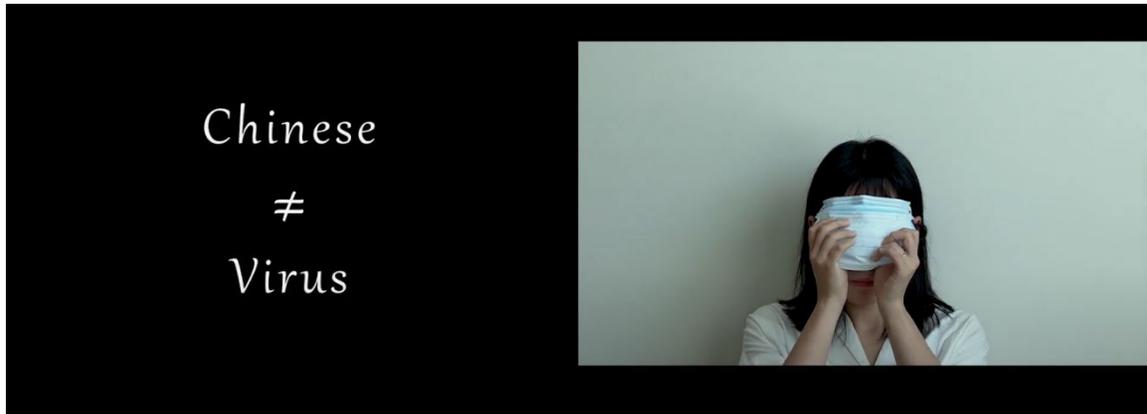


Figure 1. The Poster of 迷 / MI

*迷 / MI* is a multi-channel experimental video art mixed with movement, news clips, and media design in order to react to the unfamiliar changes about distance and COVID-19, communicate the misunderstandings, and reveal voices of Chinese individuals at the beginning of 2020. 迷 is a Chinese character with multiple meanings, including mystery, being lost and confused. MI is its Chinese pinyin, the official romanization system for Standard Chinese. I was hesitant when I decided to work on this project. One of the reasons is that I did not feel comfortable talking about topics related to politics and race because I am not sure whether what I am saying is objective, fair and justified. Another reason is that I acquiesce that one person's power is too weak to change the status quo.

“Don't be afraid. Just think of this as a performance art,” I comforted myself when I prepared to go outside with a mask at the beginning of February 2020. It was Saturday

morning, a chilly day. I could feel the heat exhaling from my mouth. I was on my way to a rehearsal. The path was quiet. I could hear the bird singing on the tree. The road was empty with only a few other people passing by. Everything was normal until I sensed a strangers' gaze focused on me. Usually, I am not uncomfortable when someone looks at me, however, this time I was.

If we don't wear a mask, we will worry about being infected, but if we wear a mask, we will suffer from all kinds of discrimination. This was the real-life situation of Chinese students and overseas Chinese under the spread of the epidemic. It is reasonable that cultural differences can bring an amount of distance between people from different cultures. In fact, I have learned to accept and manage this type of distance while I studied in France and the first year in the U.S. However, at that particular moment, it seems like there is a bomb that suddenly exploded and blew me far away from the distance that I was used to. I comforted myself by assuming that it was the impact of fear into a community that grows the distance and makes the distance grow much more. However, my chest was still getting tighter and tighter. I felt that there was something stuck in my throat, but I did not know how to bring it out.

Rehearsal ended; I took the bus back home. As expected, I was the only person who wore a mask. I picked up an isolated seat and sat down. One passenger two rows ahead of me turned back and asked: "Why are you wearing a mask here? Do you think a mask is gonna really help?" I explained that this virus is air spread so the mask can somehow avoid the transmission. Before I finished, the driver jumped in the conversation, and added that: "I watched TV last night and the news said: 'Masks are not helpful.' China is acting a little bit too much. And there is no virus here. We don't need to worry about it." At that moment,

I felt some action was needed to bring in my voice as a Chinese to explain why masks matter at this specific time and share the news I saw, as well as the stories I heard, about what actually happened in China to the community.

Reading Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction* book released some of the extra stress about the piece I decided to make as well. In his book, Schechner summarized seven functions of performance: "(1) To entertain; (2) To make something that is beautiful; (3) To mark or change identity; (4) To make or foster community; (5) To heal; (6) To teach, persuade or convince; (7) To deal with the sacred and/or the demonic" (Schechner 46). Schechner's performance function list makes me realize that my expectations of this work's function was limited to "(6) To teach, persuade or convince." However, if stopped my creation, it was better to find a new start that made me feel more comfortable. Therefore, I decided to navigate my expectations from (6) to "(4) To make or foster community and (5) To heal at the early stage of the making process." I considered this work as an archive or an exhibition. I provide the facts that I thought were missing in this community and present it as an opportunity to bring the topic on the table for discussion, receive feedback and wait for resonations.

The data I collected for this work came in many different forms. I began with the WeChat articles and newspapers I have read, journals and diaries that I wrote, videos and photographs, and conversations I have recorded with my family, friends, and professors. After conducting a cursory analysis, I took five keywords: timeline, news clips, numbers, virus, and masks as my starting points to generate new field texts which included self-recorded video clips, improvised dance movements, as well as somatic written reflections. These field texts referred to both stories of what have happened and my personal living

experiences. My intention was to generate research texts that can kinesthetically and critically represent my experience, as well as my family's and other Chinese family's experience from my perspective during the very early stage of the pandemic (Clandinin and Huber 439). Thereafter, these field texts are further developed, abstracted, re-interpreted and choreographed into movement sequences, media animations, sound design, and written quotes. Multi-channel experimental video art is the main medium I chose to convey my research outcome because it, to some extent, breaks the narrative of time and the association between video clips and channels is more playful than the single-channel video. To my way of thinking, the mix of multi-channel video art and final forms of field text representation also provides spaces where “the complexity and multi-layered storied nature of experience” evolve (Clandinin and Huber 439).

## **Part II: 痕 / HEN**

*“A mark of life; a trace of memory and a scar on my little finger. --Ziqian Zhou”*



Figure 2. Solo with Projection in 痕 / HEN

*痕/HEN* is a media archive that I created in order to summarize my journey through the time of COVID-19, including embodied experiences, emotions, and self-inquiries. It includes media design, live dance performance with projections, and a dance film. This work began with a 7 min projection mapping project I made for a Media Design class I took in December 2020. Resolume Arena, a media server for projection mapping and blending projectors, is the main tool I used for content generation. There is a series of meta-animations that I created inspired by a free metaballs animation in the Resolume Arena resource lab. This series uses black and red as the theme to express the feeling of being caught in the middle of an epidemic. The reason for choosing these two colors is that black and red not only refers to the color of the coronavirus but also have abundant metaphorical meanings related to feelings and emotions. Through the real-time animation parameters adjust function in the Resolume Arena, and combined with Anydesk, a remote-control software, I was able to present a live remote control projection mapping as I was in China, but my mapping piece was projected on a wall at ASU secret garden.

At the post-show critique, one feedback that I received from my classmates is that she felt deeply connected with the concept of my piece, not only through the choice of the color but also the pacing of all these animations. Red and black create a mysterious and heavy atmosphere. While the rhythm was a little intense in the middle, the overall flat rhythm helped her slow down. Another classmate resonated with her idea and added that there was a specific moment when she saw one animation that was like layered circles expanding and shrinking, she found her breath was following with the pace of these circles. Besides, she also mentioned that the animation I made felt like a choreographed sequence, even though the subjects were shapes instead of dancing bodies. The professor agreed with

her comment and pointed out that this project felt like a prelude. It invited audiences to take the journey into the world that I have created and made them curious about what would happen next. He proposed that he could see the potential of mixing these animations with dance movements. It will let the concept of this piece deliver even stronger. From my classmates' feedback, I recognized that even though the quarantine isolated us, performance seems like a transformation space for us to form a community and reconnect with each other. Presenting this piece at that moment was like opening the window in a dark, stuffy room and letting the light in.

All their suggestions led me to the further step of this piece. "Scripting Emotions" and "Spontaneous Gesture", coined by Liz Lerman, are the two main tools I used to generate more dance movement as research data for my further exploration. A common feature of both tools is to observe and study gestures in order to inspire creative work. Gestures are usually my main source of choreographic material. My past work experience indicates that people usually fill in and enhance the information with gestures. These gestures can provide a signal for the aspect of the story as well as a description that is most significant for the speaker. Lerman indicates that the impulse to gesture often comes into play with strong emotion or urgency to communicate (Lerman), which is exactly the information I need for my research. Another tool I often use is called "Walk and Talk." It was a good activity to generate spontaneous gestures. Besides, when I felt stuck or stagnant with "Scripting Emotions", "Walk and Talk" allowed me to rediscover what has been missing.

## Scripting Emotions

Emotions are very powerful sources for us to work creatively. But one thing that comes up when you work with emotion is that you may not want to feel all these feelings even when you revisit the story. Scripting emotions is a useful tool to employ our understanding of these emotions, but not have to be in them while we do our work. It allows us to know that we are going to have a relationship with emotions, but we don't have to pretend we are in it or have authenticity in it. My own experience with practicing this tool is that it allows me to be in an inquiry mode to explore as many possibilities that are inherent in the movement itself as I can. This tool also strengthened my sensory awareness. Every time I fall into emotions and make actions that I have studied before, like back curve, shoulder lifted, I will quickly realize that I may be involved in some negative emotions. I will give myself the choice whether to jump out of the emotion I am in immediately or allow myself to stay for a while but with the inquiry mode on in order to gather more data that may be helpful for me to understand what is exactly going on. Figure 3 shows an activity prompt that I usually use to practice this tool.

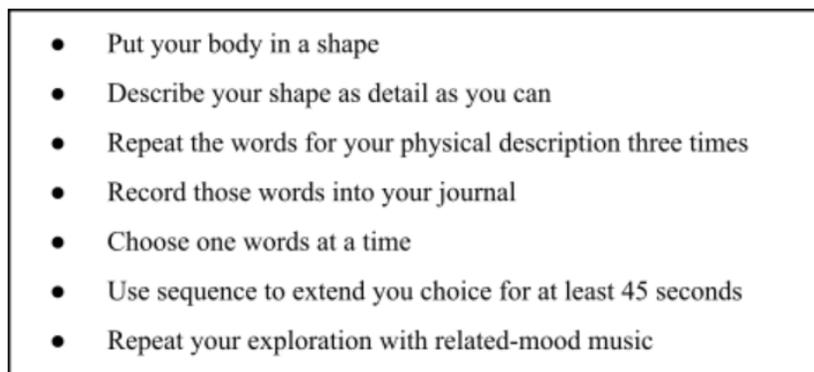
- 
- Put your body in a shape
  - Describe your shape as detail as you can
  - Repeat the words for your physical description three times
  - Record those words into your journal
  - Choose one words at a time
  - Use sequence to extend you choice for at least 45 seconds
  - Repeat your exploration with related-mood music

Figure 3. Activity Prompts

It is possible to add the meaning and emotion back to the gesture investigation. According to my experience, most of the time you will feel slightly different each time

when you recall the emotions. I assume this is because the divergent way of exploration opens a space for liberation. It helps me dig deep and brings me to understandings that I did not have before. This also resonates to what Lerman indicated that the activities of separating, taking apart the original intent of meaning, and looking at what you have left, and manipulating and playing crafting and working with that can be really liberating and bring you deeper when you go back to what your original was (Lerman).

### **Walk and Talk**

Just as its name implies, the main idea of this tool is to talk in motions. What you need is a space where you have a path to walk around. No matter what shape it is as long as it has a clear start and an end point. You will be assigned a topic to talk about. The main activity that you are going to do is walk and talk from the beginning to the end and go all the way back. If you run out of the things you are going to say, you can either repeat yourself or complain about the forced activity that you have to keep talking until you arrive at the end. The main idea is you are in motion while you are talking. It usually takes several rounds. You can keep the same length or gradually cut it into half, quarters, and eighths.

One thing I discovered from practicing this tool is the nature of forcing the speaker to keep going also helped me to move ideas forward. Even if what I was saying was not always making sense, my body in motion was staying the course and propelling creativity. In addition, practicing this tool with a time constraint often helped me focus on the topic. It also offers a space with less judgment because you do not have much time to critique. You just let your ideas flow out of your body. While I watched my recordings, I noticed that I often move my hands while I am speaking. This is where “Spontaneous Gestures” wave in and add more embodied observations into my research process.

## Spontaneous Gesture

People always gesture with their hands when they talk. If observed carefully, this expressive movement can be modified into a choreographic form/score. This activity usually starts with asking a question and watching the hands of the person answering. Then you collect some of the movement you observe by watching, then repeat with your own body. In the course of my practice, there are two ways of using this tool. One way serves self-discovery and self-motivating purpose, which combines with “Walk and Talk.” Another way is to collaborate with others. Lerman stated that a collection of “Spontaneous Gestures” can be a cornerstone for a community dance project. I truly resonate with this idea because this is one of the main reasons that lead me to this further exploration.

In terms of the second way, I gathered 5 participants and formed a story circle. Two of them are dance majors, and the rest of them are from other disciplines. Each person responded to a specific question related to my research topic:

- What is the most impressive thing that happened to you during the outbreak? It can be your own story or something you have heard or seen.
- What is one word to describe the impact of the epidemic on you? Why this word?

After everyone has responded, I led a section with the following prompts (Figure 4). After generating enough information, I built a dance from some of the spontaneous gestures observed, as well as from other movement sources. The dance was then presented to the outside of the group, with a mention of some of the stories that accompanied the gestures. A composite dance can ultimately be assembled from those constructed at a series of story circles with various groups.

- Find, name, and categorize 10-15 of the speaker's gestures;
- List what you come up with?
- What three gestures stood out to you and why?
- Repeat these gestures on your own body;
- What insight did you gain by doing so?
- What ideas and intentions do you think are prompting you or the person you observe to gesture?

Figure 4. Activity Prompts for Reflection

Due to the limited resources, the easiest way to combine the choreography and media design is to project my animation on a wall and dance in front of it. One of the problems encountered was the lighting. Since the main colors of my animation design are black and dark red, coupled with the dark projection environment, it is difficult for the audience to see most of my movement. If I add lighting in the space, the clarity of the project will be affected. In addition, the mood of this version became too depressed and sticky. It feels like moving inside the mud. Therefore, I decided to change it from a live performance to pre-recorded dance films. I planned to keep several projection sections that the dance movement is watchable, and add two props, yarn and feather since part of my goal of this work is also to spread hope and ease. One comment I got from an audience member was that she enjoyed the shifts in the filming, the blending animation and dance, and the contrast of the color and weight. It kept her attention as a viewer and provided different ways to think about the impact of the epidemic on people's lives.

The title of this piece 痕 is a Chinese character that usually means scar, trace, and mark. HEN is its pinyin. The idea of this title came from the story of this little scar on my little finger. One morning, I was using a hand plane to peel off an apple. Suddenly, the plane slipped because the apple skin was too wet to control the force. I did not notice

anything unusual at first. When I saw the blood dripped onto the white tile floor, I realized that a layer of skin above the knuckles of my little finger had been peeled off. The pain began to gradually spread from the hand to the arm to the heart, but I did not take it seriously because the cut was quite small. I just wiped the blood off with a cotton swab and put on a Band-Aid. However, the Band-Aid was soon red with blood. The bleeding was difficult to stop. I began to seek treatment. My boyfriend brought alcohol to help me clean it. But the wound was so painful as if there were hundreds of small needles piercing. I screamed and escaped from his hand, not wanting to continue.



Figure 5. A Screenshot of 痕 / HEN

He persuaded me: “Only by disinfecting and applying anti-inflammatory drugs can it be cured. Otherwise, the bacterial infection will only bring more painful diagnosis and treatment.” After thinking about it again and again, I still decided to escape. However, the bleeding did not stop till night. I had no choice but to go to the hospital. What my boyfriend said was right, because it was not treated in time, the wound was a little purulent, and the treatment process was more painful, but I persisted. A week later, the wound was crusted. After two weeks, the scab had faded away leaving a small scar. Injured, not serious, painful, easy treatment, painful, escape, get worse, treat again, endure, get better, scab, grow flesh, scab off, leave a scar. There are many similarities between the process of having a scar and

the process of creating this piece. This work can be also considered as a mark in my life trajectory, which makes 痕 the best interpretation of this work.

### Part III: 寻 / XUN

*“Love travels across the ground, flows through the air, and ultimately, carried by the water, it connects you, me, us. --Ziqian Zhou”*



Figure 6. Duet in 寻 / XUN

寻 / XUN is an experimental dance film dedicated to distance and the journey people took to build connections, not only through the internet, but also from the body, mind, and heart. It is a collaborative work between one of my closest friends, Sandra Schoenewald, and I. Schoenewald and I have been working together for two years. During the quarantine, we started an online collaboration where she played in Arizona and I danced in Shanghai. We met each other in a work I choreographed dedicated to our grandmother and got along well in that cooperation. Her patience, vulnerability, honesty, generosity, and inclusiveness deeply influenced me and relieved me from my nervousness and sadness while I worked on this deeply personal piece. Therefore, when I tried to walk out of the negative state of isolation using dance as a method, she was the first person that came to

my mind. After communicating via email, we had a ZOOM conversation that lasted 3 hours. She resonated with my idea of different layers underneath distance and she was interested in how we were able to keep the connection and bring physical presence back through dance. The questions that we aim to answer are:

- What is the distance to us?
- What does it mean to be connected? Why is it important?
- What are the necessities to build the connection back?

Feeling the convenience and the creativity of owning tools in creation, I attempted to workshop several ideas about developing some of my own tools through this work. They are called “Scripting Doodle”, “Poetic Perpetual Prompt” and “Stillness & Silence”. The emergence of these tool ideas mainly stems from my observation of my daily habits, the refinement and reflection of past experience, and the modification of existing tools.

### **Scripting Doodle**

From my experience, I found that script is an important means for me to produce choreography materials. However, I noticed that the subjects that I focused on are always gestures and body movements. I started thinking about what else I can script besides gestures. What else can be a reflection of our intuition and subconscious that hold the essence of the theme in our mind? The activity of drawing came into my mind. It occurs to me that, when I feel lonely and helpless during quarantine, I often take out the sketch book and draw. Other than dance, drawing seems like another best way for me to get out of the trapped situation. The final results of drawing are often very simple doodles with abstract shapes. When I looked back at these works, I could feel that it was recording my state during the moment. However, I never thought of digging into these concrete

representational meanings and their connection to my mind. The idea of developing my own tools gave me the opportunity to explore ways to combine the two.

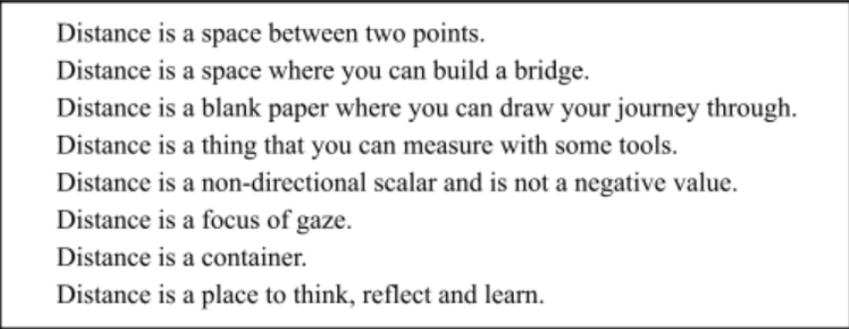
- Give one word or question, as the subject of the drawing;
- Share the drawing process and try to explain why you draw each element in this drawing ;
- List all the actions you heard or observed in words;
- Choose 3 words that stood out to you at that moment;
- Come up with 10 movements along with each word;
- Repeat several times, put them together and perform for each other.

Figure 7. Scripting Doodle Activity Prompts First Version

The first version of this activity (Figure 7) includes the following steps. During the first round of practice, I realized that only listing action words somehow stopped our further exploration. We noticed that it would be nice to offer more space to let our idea evolve several times instead of thinking about reaching the goal only once, even though a motion script is my goal. Besides, practicing three words at the same time was too much. It was challenging for both of us to remember all the movements we created and put them together. Also, working with a large amount of material at the same time makes hidden relationships even more untraceable. Therefore, we extended the script list to both actions and imageries, as well as practiced them separately. In the second round of testing, Schoenewald stated that these two changes allowed us to stay focused and dig deeper. She found the idea of connections in her paintings on the subject of distance, which also led us to use water as the main metaphor of connection. We both agreed that the epidemic has connected people all over the world in a peculiar way, and we have become a community with a shared future. We breathe the same air. Although the ground under our feet is separate, the existence of water becomes a link that connects them so that they are not isolated.

## Poetic Perpetual Prompt

Perpetual Prompt is a continuous writing activity. Over a fixed period of time, usually five minutes, people write a series of sentences that begin with the same phrases: “I come from...” This tool is like “Walk and Talk.” The central idea is to keep the pencil going but the activity is changed to write in a structural way. The way to achieve this task is open, like back in time, be straightforward and factual, and poetic. There is no right or wrong, which provides a space that leaves the judgment behind. The outcome of this activity is a body of writing that people can apply in a variety of ways. According to my past practice, I noticed that the way I approach this tool is always from a poetic perspective. Undeniably, poetry is one of my main inspiration sources in my creative process. I am intoxicated by its simplicity, abstract beauty, and abundant imagery it contains. To my way of thinking, the way the poem is structured is like how the dance has been choreographed. Therefore, I tweaked this tool a little bit by changing the prompt from “I come from...” to the topic that I am exploring.



Distance is a space between two points.  
Distance is a space where you can build a bridge.  
Distance is a blank paper where you can draw your journey through.  
Distance is a thing that you can measure with some tools.  
Distance is a non-directional scalar and is not a negative value.  
Distance is a focus of gaze.  
Distance is a container.  
Distance is a place to think, reflect and learn.

Figure 8. Poetic Perpetual Prompt Excerpt

The title of this piece, 寻 / XUN, comes from analysis and reinterpretation of the above excerpt. 寻 is a Chinese character which means searching. XUN is its Chinese pinyin. After I read the text I generated, the large imagery it conveyed felt like there was a

gap, waiting and hoping to be filled, between something I was looking for and where I am now. I found this character surprisingly consistent with the scene because there is already an action with distance in the imagery when people say this word. Searching is the main motor of this piece as well. It was how we began and what we did during the creation of this piece. This character also represents a desire to find what has been lost or what we wish to have. Furthermore, poetic writing text also influenced the design of this title. The intention to include both English letters and Chinese characters in the title was to represent our nationalities. The use of the slash was to create a sense of distance. The space I added around the slash left the hope for connection.

### **Stillness & Silence**

After the show, the most feedback I got was the successful use of silence and stillness. One audience member emailed me her feedback and said that: “I loved all that quiet time in the end - the suspension, the patience, just the quiet beauty of your presences - so welcome after all the movement and changes in perspective evolving throughout the film.” The original idea for the ending was to present a sense of connection and appreciation for the effort we took to find each other. I used the cup as a metaphor for the microphone to hear the words we wanted to say to each other. The shot we took for this clip was one take and we stopped when we felt it was enough. However, I did not realize how long it took until I put clips into the editing process.

When I was hesitant and afraid of exhausting the audience, Jonathan Burrows’s quotes in his book *A Choreographer’s Handbook* opened my mind in a flipped way. Burrows mentioned that: “Stillness and silence are as strong as any other material, and without them your audience will become exhausted” (Burrows 91). It is possible that the

audience is waiting for a pause in their intense viewing experience, especially in online performances. Burrows also shared that: “People’s feeling for time during a performance is affected by the adrenaline pumping through your body. This may be exactly what you want to capitalize on, so that the pause is sewn into the fabric of the time you and the audience are experiencing” (Burrows 91). In my case, if the length of silence was enough during the live recording, then I should keep it as it was. The fact proved that I was not satisfied with the short-cut edition as well because it made the artistic conception end abruptly, and it seemed a bit hasty.



Figure 9. The Ending Moment of 尋 / XUN

It is the quote that Burrows cited from his conversation with Kevin Volans that guided me to recognize that “Silence and Stillness” could serve as another useful tool in my toolbox. Kevin Volans said that on the music he and Matteo Fargion wrote for *The Stop Quartet*, they returned to silence as a structural element and not just as a pause (Burrows 92). I mentioned several times how other tools helped me keep going and let the energy and ideas flow. However, sometimes, slowing down or evening staying in stillness can also be an efficient way to move forward. We may miss something if we do not give enough time for ourselves to discover because our focus is too straight. In this case, “Stillness & Silence” can be considered as a stop on the journey that allows you to look around and

even look backward. However, this tool is still in its transition status. The question Burrows posted along with Volans's quote was "when is a pause just a pause, and when does it become another material?" (Burrows 92). It is worth thinking about for my further tool development.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSION

#### **The Power of Narrative**

I usually approached my thinking and writing more from an academic kind of intellectual perspective because of my previous accounting background. In fact, the purpose of my research started purely as an investigation of dance and digital media. If the epidemic does not occur, my final applied project will likely focus on audience interaction and the analysis of interactive installation applications in immersive dance performances. However, the project-making process gradually became more and more meaningful to me as it became a way for me to express myself and cope with the acute trauma that I experienced from the pandemic. In this case, the narrative became the main resource of my research. It not only allows me to record my experience from the inside out but also provides fruitful sensory data which eventually became powerful materials to evoke empathy and resonance from the audience members.

Once reflecting on my applied project, I found that when I directly choreographed the somatic data that I collected for this project along with the field texts in an abstractive aesthetic, the delivery of my project was usually ambiguous. Audience members often needed extra information to understand what my intention was. I, as the choreographer, sometimes may felt trapped by the repetition of emotional expression instead of growing with deeper understanding. However, things changed when I analyzed and interpreted the somatic data through a narrative retelling process. I found that the common pattern of narrative became a live entity that holds the essence of data in its plotline as well as leaves a blank space for audience members to engage. It provides a better way of understanding

the theme of choreography, which connected with what Andrea Gibbs, an Australian digital radio host, mentioned in her TED talk, “The Power of Storytelling”, that people can understand each other better and find our commonality with others via stories (Gibbs).

In addition, the embedded distance and the communication mode that the internet setup so far make the human connections difficult to perceive. I think it indeed adds extra challenges to reconstruct a choreography into an online performance format. However, I found that the empathy that narratives provide can somehow break the unfamiliarity by adding sensorial depths to the flat 16:9 screen. This depth creates a vivid virtual performance stage that allows audience members to feel safe to immerse. Gibbs also pointed out that we can connect and feel less alone in the world by using stories, which I found extraordinary meaningful especially during the era of the pandemic. At the beginning of the epidemic, it was the stories that my mother told me about her experience during the epidemic, how my father, a doctor worked at the front line, fought against the virus as well as moving news happened in Wuhan that made me feel the distance between me and my home was not as far as I felt. When racial discrimination caused by the virus spread overseas, it was the stories shared by other brave Chinese who suffered from racial discrimination experiences that encouraged me to reveal my voice to the larger community through dance. This brought another significant meaning to my project.

Last but not least, one of the main reasons for me to start this project was that I did not see myself in the western narratives at the beginning of the epidemic. Aminatta Forna, a Scottish and Sierra Leonean writer, wrote in her journal “Selective Empathy: Stories and the Power of Narrative” that: “Writers from all minority groups, and women writers, and those from colonized nations—all of us who have been spoken for, instead of listened to,

have had to seize our own narratives” (Forna). Forna insisted that the power of the story lies in the hands of the storyteller. It is necessary for the storyteller who has been spoken for to take control of the narrative. I found that my applied project was success in terms of what Forna stated “taking the narrative center.” After I shared my project world widely, I received many appreciations about presenting the stories from a Chinese’ perspective. Audience members’ resonances and generous feedback also reduced my sense of distance due to social distancing restriction and made me feel supported. In addition, this project helped me become more conscious about comprehending deviation that may caused by the culture difference. I will be more aware of this deviation when I plan to present my work to the audience members from different cultures.

### **Processing COVID-19 Through Dance**

I found that what this project helped me was to process the physical and mental tension caused by COVID-19 in a healthy productive artistic way. Both somatic awareness and the creative choreography tool played a significant role in this achievement. I was trapped in negative emotions for a while at the very beginning of this project. It was the dance that severed as a gateway for me to feel relief. I realized that this relief came from two ways: internal awareness and external expression. I noticed that practicing Lerman’s creative tools became efficient somatic approaches which helped me yield my internal focus. I was no longer stuck in the blocks that I built for myself unconsciously. Instead, I began to observe and note what these obstacles looked like as well as where were the possible exits. I found that blocks and obstacles were usually built by my embodied habits, like lifted shoulders, curved back, knee to the chest. One of the benefits of noticing these habits is that it can provide an opportunity for me to make other choices when I engaged

in a similar situation. Besides, practicing re-habit these movements with consciousness not only provided a deep understanding of how movement connects with anxiety, but also made the mind-body connectivity easier for me to achieve.

It is worth noting that, however, giving too much focus and attention to the internal focus may, to some extent, shorten the practitioner's connection with the outside world. One of the methods that I found was beneficial is to collaborate and practice with other people. The external perspectives they provide can open my mind to different dimensions. Practice tools with eyes open or with a mirror is another practical tool as well. As a Chinese saying goes, the eyes are the window of the soul. They are the portals of the inside and the outside. I am looking forward to researching how different gazes like soft gaze, direct/indirect gaze, middle/far range gaze can help me connect the internal with the external as I continue. Overall, I found that the entire process from choreographing and rehearsing to performing has transformed into a powerful inner strength resource for me to reference whenever I face the uncertainty and fear that may happen in the future.

### **Final Reflection**

*“Be conscious, be patient, be brave. --Ziqian Zhou”*



Figure 10. A Photography of Sunrise in the Sun Bay

Feb 16th, 2020, the fifth day of the Chinese Lunar New Year, is usually the last day in my hometown tradition to celebrate the Chinese New Year. My boyfriend and I decided to drive to Sun Bay to watch the sunrise as a small celebration to embrace the new year. The alarm went off at 5:20 am. I felt sleepy and limp all over because of the mountain climbing the day before. I wanted to back out, but my boyfriend kept pushing me and dragged me up. After a hasty wash-up, we set off on our sunrise journey. Our destination was not far, and 30 minutes later, we arrived at the viewing platform at the hillside. The sky was dark with heavy clouds and water vapor. I crossed my arms and sat silently with my boyfriend on the bench staring into the endless darkness and waiting for the sun.

Somewhere around six thirty, the sky began to light up with a blush. However, the cloud and water vapor were still heavy. We could only dimly see the mountains not far away. My stomach became tight as the disappointment of not seeing the sunrise rose up from the bottom of my feet. At the weather broadcast's predicted time, 7:08 am, nothing changed. I could feel my body was getting heavy to the ground. I took a deep breath and exhaled when my chest expanded to its maximum and the dropped head was the last part to squeeze all of the air out. I prepared to leave. However, my boyfriend covered my eyes and stopped me. He asked me to take several deep breaths again and started a countdown: an extremely long 10, the same length 9, a little bit faster 8, ... super-fast 321.

“See! The Sun comes up!” my boyfriend shouted excitedly and loosened his hands. The black in front of my eyes was quickly filled with red. I slowly opened my eyes and my gaze followed his finger. The veiled orange sun rose slowly out of the water. It kept rising, shuttled between the clouds, and presented various shapes. I opened my arms and chest reaching forward to gather more energy and warmth from the sunshine. My whole body

was activating, and all sensory data were uplifted and spreading out like vines. While the sun rose into a certain height, the sun shone on the water and formed a bridge-like road across the water inviting me to follow the light and hope and move forward. It was a magical moment.

The whole process of creating this project is like my journey to watching the sunrise. In a journey, you lose, you find; you explore, you stuck; you give up, you get your courage back. When you think you find the end, it may become the beginning of the next adventure. Therefore, you must stay conscious, patient, curious and brave, and most importantly not give up. Fortunately, your body is with you all the time. It is your companion, your guide, your tool, your mirror, your glue, your pan, your vision, your voice, and your everything. Whenever you feel lost, it will give you generous cues, as long as you stay conscious, patient, curious and sometimes brave to allow the body to digest. You usually require a backpack with you. What you put inside are going to be your tools when you are faced with difficulties. Sometimes having a toolbox with you is like the rope above when you are trapped in a hole. It can let you lift your head, open your chest, and chin to the sky and see the hope.

## EPILOGUE

April 1, 2021

Dear Ziqian,

I know that you are suffering from many mental side effects from the COVID-19 crisis. I am not able to tell you what actually happened, because this is going to break the law of time and cause serious impacts. However, I hope this poem will find you and provide some clues that can give you courage to overcome the darkness and move on with your life positively.

I was in front of a wall made by bricks

layer by layer with squared structure

But now I find myself standing next to a tree

It grows with its own intuition and fosters its own pattern

Wind breezes

Leaves rustled

wafted in the wind

waiting to be heard

waiting to be found

waiting to be resonated

You are not alone

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APPENDIX A

VIDEO LINKS TO MY APPLIED PROJECT

迷 / MI: <https://youtu.be/PC96USI4ooM>

February, 2020

**迷 / MI**

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*"Ebola is not an African virus, H1N1 is not a Mexican virus, and the coronavirus is not a Chinese Virus."*  
--Ziqian Zhou

Chinese  
≠  
Virus



痕 / HEN: <https://youtu.be/QuibMBcIZm4>

November, 2020

**痕 / HEN**

*"A mark of life; a trace of memory and a scar on my little finger."*  
--Ziqian Zhou



尋 / XUN: <https://youtu.be/FnxTARCoQO4>

January, 2021

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尋 / XUN

*"Love travels across the ground, flows through the air, and ultimately, carried by the water, it connects you, me, us."  
--Ziqian Zhou*

APPENDIX B

WORKS INFORMING MY RESEARCH

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