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Adaptation and empathy: intercultural communication in a choreographic project

Cheryl Stock

Abstract

The tricky terrain of intercultural communication within the pressure-cooker environment of creating new performance work is explored through the experiences of five Australians working with 55 artists in Hanoi, Vietnam on a project called Through the Eyes of the Phoenix. Key cultural communication issues such as the concept of ‘face’, identity, translation, adaptability, ambiguity tolerance, empathy, enmeshment and the development of shared understandings are examined in relation to theories of high and low context cultures and individualist/collectivist frameworks. The experiences of both Australian and Vietnamese artists are foregrounded, revealing the importance of other intercultural communication modes such as visual, kinaesthetic and tactile languages as well as the languages of their art forms. Immersion in social activities and the importance of the emotional domain are also highlighted as essential factors to survive and thrive in intense creative collaborations across cultures. These dance perspectives, embedded in practice, provide alternative contributions to the messy complexities of intercultural communication.

A Vietnamese Context – The Phoenix Project

In my eleventh visit to Hanoi in 1997, I was invited to create Through the Eyes of the Phoenix (Qua Mat Phuong Hoang), by the national dance company Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre (Nha Hat Nhac Vu Kich Vietnam) and the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture, having previously created works well received by Vietnamese audiences. The Phoenix Project invitation followed a visit by a selected group of 16 experienced dancers, with whom I had established a close rapport, from the Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre to Melbourne in 1996 to perform one of my works, Land of Waiting Souls, as well as Vietnamese national dances. Although I had acquired a working knowledge of oral and written Vietnamese language, it was not sufficient for me to communicate easily. Formal language study and over a decade of interaction with Vietnamese culture assisted my understanding of key cultural and relationship concepts embedded in its language and literature (read in translation) but this and other projects had been conducted with colleagues in a mixture of English, French (in which I am fluent) and Vietnamese, with an interpreter often at rehearsals and formal meetings. During the Phoenix Project, however, I was more acutely aware that intercultural communication issues extended beyond factors of language and shaped my interactions with Vietnamese colleagues.

This paper examines how theories of intercultural communication intersect with this experience of creative practice in an intercultural context. By privileging the dancers’ voices along with my own, I posit that the Phoenix choreographic project reveals matters of understanding often missing from theoretical perspectives on intercultural exchange. Finally, the paper argues that the challenges and rewards of this case study might inform other intercultural situations, not only those that take place within the field of the arts.

The aim of the Phoenix Project was to creatively explore tensions between traditional cultural forms and contemporary changes taking place in Vietnamese culture, including the rise of Karaoke; the French colonial legacy of ballroom dancing (the company dancers supplement their meagre income by performing the contemporary competitive version); the rise of consumerism; and ‘white’
weddings. The resulting dance work was to be affectionate and ironic. To this end, culturally
different myths surrounding the Phoenix were to provide an overarching metaphor of the new
arising from the old. In previous collaborations, we had explored a hybrid dance language that was a
blend of classical ballet, contemporary dance and nationalised Vietnamese traditional dance. In the
Phoenix Project, we additionally explored a pastiche of current popular styles in Vietnamese dance
to create a new synthesis from the previous hybridised forms. The project also afforded the
opportunity to open up creative communication processes, in an attempt to counter the hierarchical
approach common in a national ballet company, and reinforced by the added strictures of a
Communist Ministry of Culture.

Previously I had worked alone with Vietnamese colleagues with interpreters, and relied on a
common dance language to communicate and build artistic relationships. During other visits, I had
accommodated the prevailing artistic modus operandi in Vietnam; this time, however, my desire,
shared by my Vietnamese colleagues, was to participate in a more open working process. Five
Australian artists, who had not previously visited Vietnam, joined me: designer/visual artist Michael
Pearce, composer Sarah de Jong, with Tina Yong and Sun Ping as co-choreographers. Three were
Anglo-Australians while Tina, who came to Australia as a child, is Chinese Malay and Ping from
Harbin, China, immigrated to Australia in the early 1990s. Sarah collaborated with renowned
Vietnamese composer/songwriter Pho Duc Phuong, while Michael worked with local designers Song
Hao, Trung Lien and Cong Hoan. The dancers were from the Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre and
graduates of the Vietnam Dance College (Truong Mua Vietnam), where training comprises seven
years full-time study in classical ballet and national forms of traditional dance.

I had worked with many of these dancers since 1988, and Ping, Tina and Michael had met them in
Melbourne in 1996. Because of this history, I was encouraged to experiment with a more Western-
based choreographic approach of privileging creative processes over a more directorial style.
Perhaps naively, I believed that conditions – political, economic and cultural – associated with
opening up the country under the doi moi (renovation) policy, would translate into a more genuinely
collaborative working process. However, despite the friendships, the sheer scale of the Phoenix
Project was to hinder a more intimate artistic investigation. In this paper, I focus on how corporeal
and affective aspects of intercultural communication were negotiated through my own reflections
and interviews with the participating artists. Theoretical concepts frame a retrospective examination
of what took place, to test intuitive and experiential understandings that emerged directly from the
Phoenix Project.

Key Concepts of Intercultural Communication – Then and Now

Intercultural communication extends and challenges an understanding of communication as “the
sharing of meanings” (Irwan 1996: 21–22). The feedback and negotiation of those shared meanings
in an intercultural context, according to Lustig and Koester, involves a “symbolic, interpretative,
transactual, contextual process” (1993: 25). At the time of my study, this theoretical field had
developed largely around key notions concerning high and low context cultures, individual and
collectivist frameworks, ‘face’, adaptability, a tolerance for ambiguity and enmeshment.

High context cultures are identified with collectivist structures and philosophies, often seen as
dominant in Asian cultures, whereas low context cultures that favour the individual are viewed as
dominant in Western cultures (Hofstede 1984, Hall 1989). This dichotomy, which occurs in various
combinations and levels depending on the specific setting, was claimed as a key cause of misunderstandings in intercultural personal and professional relationships (Ting-Toomey and Korzenny 1991, Brislin 1993, Min-Sun Kim 1993, Irwan 1996). High context cultures, such as Vietnam, are regarded as more formal, built around hierarchies deeply rooted in the past thus relying “less on verbal communication and more on understanding through shared experience, history, and implicit messages” (Irwan 1996: 41). Low context cultures, such as Australia, tend towards informality, stress equality in interactions and engage in more direct, logical or verbal communication. Contradictions are immediately obvious. Vietnam promotes a pervasive rhetoric of social equality stemming from its Communist ideology, whilst at the same time it perpetuates a hierarchical order through its language structure, and engrained, if often disavowed, Confucian and neo-Confucian precepts shape the family and the workplace. The dichotomy between individualism and collectivism related to high/low contexts is observable in social behaviours (Gudykunst 1993: 65, Min-Sun Kim 1993: 141). For example, high context/collective social patterns were prevalent for the Vietnamese dancers, including those married with children, who lived in the family home or compound, and for whom almost all social occasions included at least three generations. This collective environment extends beyond the family to the workplace. Other factors contributing to a collectivist theory in this context include the economic imperative of supplementing highly inadequate state salaries with work in extended family run businesses or families living together in cramped conditions.

High context cultures, according to this formulation, also equate to ‘high uncertainty avoidance’, a strategy of indecision designed to minimise stress until all other possibilities have been canvassed (in Brislin 1993: 257–258), whereas such a strategy appears to increase stress in low context societies. In individualist contexts, clarification, advance planning and unequivocal decisions are usually considered ways to minimise tension. This theory appeared to be borne out by the following example. Our Vietnamese hosts delayed explaining to the Australian creative team that two principal dancers would be performing in Laos and thus be absent from rehearsals for 10 of our 22-day rehearsal period. We were first informed indirectly over a rehearsal break by one of the dancers. Once this news had been brokered, the company management announced it more formally. In this instance, divergent approaches to the nature and timing of disruptive news threatened to destabilise the collaborative working model. To attribute this incident to the binaries of low and high context communication styles is however reductive; there were also political reasons and issues of power, including what Martin and Nakayama (in Min-Sun Kim 2010: 171) refer to as historical, social and political “macro-contexts” and “the hidden and destabilising aspects of culture”. Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre is an arm of the Ministry of Culture and the Communist Party Government and the dancers are employees of the state. Cultural events are a tool of ‘soft diplomacy’ used for propaganda and nationalistic purposes with artistic development a low priority. Thus, it is not surprising that the dancers sent to Laos were themselves informed of that decision at the last possible moment. As with any creative project contingency plans are necessary, therefore understudies covered their roles. However, their absence reduced their collaborative input into creation of roles dependent on the particular skills and personalities of individuals. The motivation for changing the company’s normal working process in which roles were easily interchangeable was thus subverted by this external and controlling precedent.

Other contradictions and exceptions point to a more nuanced and less Eurocentric explanation of intercultural communication theories. ‘Asia’ has often been viewed conveniently and reductively as
a monolithic and homogenised entity, an approach that does not acknowledge its cultural and psychological diversity (Matsumoto 2007). With the pervasiveness of globalisation and tensions between global and local, alternative theoretical perspectives on interculturalism have arisen based on philosophies that recognise commonalities as well as differences in Asian, African and Indigenous worldviews and belief systems (Chen and Starosta 2003, Ishii 2006, Min-Sun Kim 2010, Zhang 2008, Kuo and Chew 2009, Miike 2009). Gaps in understanding between individual and collective cultural frames, or by different emphases on direct or indirect communication, may rationalise problems in intercultural communication, however, such binary and predominantly cognitive-based theories also contribute to misreadings of interculturalism. In what follows, I specifically focus on intercultural theories that provide a more Asian perspective where they have relevance to topics identified as critical in the experience of the Phoenix Project.

Informing (Inter)cultural Identity through Professional Practice

Young Yun Kim (2008: 361) in writings on ‘intercultural personhood’ suggests that “the way people experience cultural identity is essentially not a rational but an emotionally driven experience”. Ting-Toomey (1993: 79–80) also examining issues of cultural identity, contrasts the ‘autonomous’ or ‘independent construal of self’ with the ‘connected’ or ‘interdependent construal of self’. Participants of the Phoenix Project moved between both these ‘selves’ often aligning their experience with an intercultural theory of “a dynamic, adaptive, and transformative identity conception” (Young Yun Kim 2008: 360), which encompassed emotional communication. Whilst the dancers often expressed individual and contrasting opinions quite forcibly and passionately in rehearsals, when it came to an artistic decision, seemingly endless discussions were required to reach an aesthetic or creative consensus. When the interpreter translated the Australian artists’ ideas – stopping the flow of rehearsals and frustrating the creative process – such instances were also indicators of a deeper and richer attention to the struggle of Vietnamese and Australian participants to explore a meaningful intercultural dance dialogue through what Ting-Toomey (in Young Yun Kim 2008: 362) refers to as ‘identity negotiation’ and ‘communicative resourcefulness’. Artistically I refer to this as aesthetic adaptation and ‘creative’ compromise; with the latter not intended negatively since it holds the promise of liminal and not-yet-thought-of creative possibilities. In this dance context, we all embodied some hybridity – classical/contemporary, classical/traditional Vietnamese, ballet/ballroom and other combinations – that had been encoded on individual bodies through our diverse physical disciplines as well as our learned aesthetics. It would take diverse methods to find an effective mode of communication between these codes and identities.

Creating a dance dialogue through embodied explorations required acculturation to “acquire new cultural and aesthetic sensibilities” as well as deculturation, or “unlearning [of] at least some of the old cultural elements” (Young Yun Kim 2008: 363). Although the Australians were what Young Yun Kim (2008: 365) terms “temporary sojourners” in Vietnam our collective experience, Vietnamese and Australian, resulted in an adaptive and transformative dance identity. This was most compellingly displayed in the Vietnamese dancers’ interpretation of the choreography, which infused my modern choreographic style with different accents. An aesthetic transfer or ‘Vietnamisation’ also transformed the work in subtle but discernible ways because the encoded practices of traditional Vietnamese dance communicated collective and appropriate aesthetic values. Concepts of space-time (Stock 2005), stemming from Buddhist, Animist and Confucianist...
traditions (known as tam giao or three religions in Vietnam), and interdependent holistic concepts of beauty and harmony informed their dancing. Commenting on an undulating fluidity, Tina remarked of the dancers:

They probably think it is much nicer to give it a softer approach, to sort of melt into the music, whereas we think of the music as having quite strong dynamics ... they want to lilt and float with the music.\(^9\)

In Vietnam, this sense of fluidity is known as mem and fundamental to aesthetic appreciation. Learning these and other concepts professionally and personally had assisted my acquisition of a certain intercultural competency, or what Min-Sun Kim (2010: 172) names the “relational connection of all things”, in which the communication of harmony is vital to survival. Whilst an Asia-centric view of intercultural communication runs the danger of essentialism, “validating alternative ways of knowing” (174) acknowledges the central tenet of multiple, relational perspectives that can lead to such adaptive behaviours.

Power Differentials in Creative Performance Projects

ntercultural exchanges, even when resulting in adaptive or inclusive behaviours cannot avoid the power differential of the project leader. In the Phoenix Project, I was in a position of authority as an international director. As a guest of the national ballet company and given the support of the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture, which funded the Vietnamese participants and in-country expenses of the Australians, political hierarchies and obligations were embedded in the project. At the same time, I often felt powerless; subject to the same censorship and sudden changes in plan as my Vietnamese colleagues, yet exacerbated by a lack of fluent Vietnamese language and nuanced socio-cultural codes. Despite my desire to create a more equitable relationship within the rehearsal studio, my closer collaboration remained with the Australian creative team rather than the Vietnamese dance artists.\(^{10}\)

In order to creatively empower the dancers, I had adopted strategies of using group improvisation exercises rather than assigning individual creative tasks. The dancers were more comfortable with this approach, which managed to engender a relaxed team-based process to shaping sections of the work. Although I did not feel this achieved a high level of collaboration, interviews with the dancers contradicted my perception, as male dancer Ngoc Hien remarked:

We learnt a new way to work. For example, you are not just waiting for us to follow you; we have to work together with the choreographer to make it happen. We are not the negative side of the picture; we are part of the positive side, by being active in putting our own ideas inside. And of course this is very tiring. You have to think for yourself.\(^{11}\)

Similarly, a younger female dancer Bích Huong commented:

The big thing I learnt was we have to be creative in the process of developing our roles in Qua Mat Phuong Hoang. Through this work I learnt how to be confident. It was easier to do Em, Nguoi Phu Nu Viet Nam (the previous work), but when you have to find something new in a role through your own creativity you will get more out of it and enjoy it more.\(^{12}\)
In terms of intercultural adaptation, Thu Lan remarked that “we understand that we will interpret [your idea] and transfer it into our bodies in a more Vietnamese style”.

Although the Vietnamese dancers reported feeling more highly valued as artists in this model, a formal respect for me in rehearsals, as an older woman and as director of the project, still set me apart. Dancers used the honorific form of address; ba (‘auntie’, respect for an older woman or one in authority) in more formal interactions but on informal social occasions and sometimes in rehearsals called me chi (literally ‘older sister’, a more casual and affectionate term). In the Vietnamese language, hierarchical relationships are carefully delineated; and an array of personal pronouns is used to differentiate family and society members (Huynh Dinh Te 1988: 45–46). Age, status, family relationships and occasion determine the pronouns for the word ‘you’ or ‘I’ and their usage. Prior to an interview, dancer Bui Thuc Anh asked me if she should use the personal pronoun ‘I’ (toi) and I encouraged her to do so. After a few sentences she reverted to using em (literally, younger sister or brother, a third person term for children but also used by young people amongst themselves, as well as when speaking to a superior about themselves). The constraints of grammar in Vietnamese partly explain this sense of formality and informality but social mores also contribute to choices of personal pronouns. In the Phoenix Project, however, the kind of friendly banter and easy physicality that occurs throughout the dance world in rehearsals was present in the studio, making relations less dependent on language or strict social codes.

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Issues of Translation

Much discussion of intercultural communication revolves around language skills and/or skilled interpretation. For the Australian artists, interpreters emerged as a critical factor in the Phoenix Project and as we accelerated towards the work’s premiere, lack of availability and appropriateness of interpreters exacerbated tensions. Due to a tight budget, we were often reliant on the company to provide translation, when a promise of three interpreters was reduced to one, Anh Phuong, who was often unavailable. Although French or Cantonese served as a common language for some participants, and varying degrees of English and Vietnamese between others, translation problems limited our exploration of the conceptual and philosophical aspects of the project.\textsuperscript{15} Designer Michael Pearce felt the lack of language “a real barrier”.\textsuperscript{16} He found it “difficult to relax in social situations, and consequently, without language you can run away from people a little bit”.\textsuperscript{17}

Intercultural communication theory suggests a three-way process in translation, with the interpreter serving as the “mediator between the languages and between the individuals and their communities as well” (Banks and Banks 1991: 174). Each act of translation calls for a series of decisions and judgments as to how ambiguities will be translated and each decision invokes “not only the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the translator but also the translator’s own cultural, political, and value orientation in the world” (181). Despite our empathy with and reliance on Anh Phuong, I was aware that as a Communist Party Member and Vice-Director of the company, much of the communication was filtered through his perceptions, culturally, politically and professionally, as well as his position of authority. Therefore, on occasions like ministerial or other official meetings, I would ask bilingual
Vietnamese friends, such as former interpreters now working for foreign companies, to arrange meetings at times they were free. I trusted them not to omit information for cultural or political reasons, and afterwards we would discuss any beneath the surface or ‘deep-structure’ information they observed. This dual translation heightened awareness of potential communication and/or cultural difficulties that could adversely affect the project, such as inadvertently making inappropriate cultural references or innovations in the work, particularly in relation to the portrayal of the traditional Phoenix.

Role of a Cultural Consultant

An effective way to manage communication is to work more closely with what I call ‘cultural consultants’, whose role extends beyond that of interpreting. In my previous project, Land of Waiting Souls in 1995, Anh Phuong had been a central player in the collaborative team. His deep understanding of his own culture and profession was combined with a linguistic, cultural and professional knowledge of Australia gained through being a guest artist in my company, Dance North, for a year in 1990. Crucial to the relationship between a cultural consultant and her/his colleagues are mutual trust, respect and empathy, both personally and professionally. Claire Conceison also describes such a person as someone:

able to assist in interpreting and/or translating, but more importantly he or she can draw on knowledge deeper than that of the artists in order to inform and smooth potential conflicts. No intercultural project is without its challenges, and these challenges provide opportunity for growth and experimentation … but there are also misunderstandings that can be avoided, setbacks to the progress of a production that can be prevented, and harsh repercussions amongst participants and in the theatre-going public that can be softened. (1995: 164)

We were fortunate to have Pham Anh Phuong in this role in the Phoenix Project but his concurrent work as coordinating manager, and the scale of our project, meant we could not always rely on him to interpret. The difference between Anh Phuong’s presence and absence can be illustrated in the following examples. As a choreographer, Anh Phuong could translate technical terms in both languages as well as understand theatrical concepts so that many staging decisions were made quickly and easily. In the first orchestra calls, however, he was unavailable and misunderstandings arose when the musicians and dancers tried to accommodate unfathomable or incorrect instructions by an inexperienced interpreter. When Anh Phuong was interpreting in rehearsals there was a different atmosphere compared to when one of the dancers, Phong, who had picked up English during his years of study in Hong Kong, ‘filled in’ as interpreter. Since Anh Phuong was in a position of power in relation to the dancers, there was less open discussion when he was present but when the younger Phong was translating, more time was lost in disagreements about his version of my choreographic concepts or tasks. On the other hand, we benefited collaboratively from these delays because the dancers contributed suggestions and engaged more confidently in debate about the work as we stumbled to make sense of an instruction.

Beyond Translation

The spasmodic and changing nature of interpreters eventually made us less reliant. The range of communication strategies expanded, and collaborative possibilities became dependent upon transnational understandings of our art forms. Tina and Ping were able to rely on a highly developed
kinaesthetic language in the studio, and Tina’s perception was that language was only “a bit of a problem, not a huge problem”. Even if lack of language affected the subtleties of ideas in the work, alternative understandings had to be created through a movement language.\(^{18}\)

The Vietnamese artists were less concerned about language differences, perhaps partly due to being in their own environment. Dancer Bích Huong remarked that when the interpreter was not a dance professional, they would mistranslate ideas that caused more confusion than when they had to solve problems without translation:

> There is a link between what has happened [choreographically] and is about to happen so often we can guess what will occur next, and sometimes we catch some words and work it out ... the way you move can show us what you want.\(^{19}\)

Vu Long thought language had limited influence in realising the work commenting that “we only use language as transportation (vehicle) for communication, but what you feel inside is the more important”.\(^{20}\) Operating in their own language and environment, the Vietnamese made many adjustments to accommodate unfamiliar ideas and processes and all participants actively sought to increase shared understandings through kinaesthetic, or otherwise expressive, forms of non-verbal communication. In theoretical terms, a mutual transformation was taking place, facilitated by convergent relationships that fostered what Kim calls “intercultural adaptability” (Young Yun Kim 1991: 265–266). Often communication was initiated at a verbal level, with words half or barely understood, while a professional knowledge or expertise filled the gaps. For example, when Michael could not verbally communicate his ideas for the execution of costumes, the wardrobe staff “sorted out the problems – they actually got things to work – not necessarily even communicating with me”.\(^{21}\) Whilst the stylistic results differed from Michael’s design expectations, they were appropriate cultural and professional responses to the shared project purpose.

Lack of clarity in communication thus provided an indirect means for the Vietnamese to assume greater control over areas of the creative process, and in subtle but significant ways to transform the Australian team's artistic concepts. In retrospect, this was positive for the project as a whole, making for a more equitable ownership and control of creative outcomes. Naturally, some of these ‘creative compromises’ clashed with the Australians’ aesthetics and I suspect that the converse was also true for the Vietnamese artists. Taking an artistic idea, and reshaping it to new cultural and professional frameworks became the key to our intercultural interactions thus reducing reliance on language and translation.

Vu Long describes the dancers’ sense of creative empowerment as different from their usual experience in Vietnam:

> Before the project we had a meeting with everyone in Nha Hat Nhac Vu Kich and we talked about the main idea of the project, to get the concepts across. Even Michael came to draw everything on the wall to illustrate the background to the work, and to help the dancers imagine what and how it will be.\(^{22}\) After that, we the dancers can exchange our ideas and have discussions about the work. Everyone could understand the ideas but could feel them in different ways ... I really liked this process of creation.\(^{23}\)
This mutual adaptation, assisted by non-linguistic modes of communication, had changed the way we related to each other and was key to what Hunter (2005: 154) posits as an effective intercultural collaboration, one that includes “an exploration of intersubjectivity and an ‘aesthetics’ of intersubjectivity appropriate to the specific context and moment”.

Social Interaction

Social interactions became another strategy to create non-verbal understandings about the wider cultural environment. During the Phoenix Project, we celebrated two weddings of dancers within the company, took time out from rehearsals to visit family or temple shrines on certain days of the lunar month, and spent extended lunch periods with artists and their families, lying beside them for a sleep after the midday meal. Bharucha emphasises the importance of ‘living’ with another culture in the following extract from Theatre and the World:

I think that one must assert the value of living in the cultures that one is exploring. By living, I don’t mean ‘experiencing’ a culture through artefacts like documents, ethnographies, slides, performance techniques. I mean something much more basic like participating in the everyday life of ‘other’ cultures, which is made up of those familiar actions like eating, drinking, sleeping, talking, selling, buying, laughing, quarrelling, which are shared by people all over the world, but which are also concretized and perceived in specific ways. (1993: 150)

These experiences of everyday life provided the Australians with a ‘feel’ for our Vietnamese colleagues’ pace of life and their sense of space and time. This awareness subliminally infused the work and contributed to its enjoyment by participating artists and audiences. The informal social interactions contribute relational clues about the company, giving a sense of visual and aesthetic preferences that can inform a closer reading of the cultural dynamics. Organised occasions such as ‘official’ dinners, as well as sightseeing, also provided an alternative repertoire of signifiers for understanding differences between the public and private domain.

Visual, Kinaesthetic and Tactile Communication

Non-verbal communication strategies also shift the creative and professional balance of power. Inventive visual communication, in the form of ‘drawing conversations’, developed between the designer Michael, his assistants and the production crew. Shared qualities of patience and imagination, as well as growing mutual respect, made for a strong communicative bond amongst the design/technical team. With dancers, who are particularly sensitised to physical, visual and kinetic signs and where gestures are primary communication tools, choreographic phrases were often adjusted if a level of kinaesthetic discomfort was sensed as the dancers attempted to re-construct their encoded dancing body to incorporate an unfamiliar movement style. Every dance technique constructs a specialised body, which, as Foster (1997: 241) points out, represents “a given choreographer’s or tradition’s aesthetic vision of dance” and which through a series of physical and verbal metaphors, lead the dancer into a “given system of conceptualising the body” (239). Prefacing his remark with his intention to understand the concepts behind the movement, dancer Van Hai commented: “I never think of imitating exactly your movements. I try to understand your idea and do it my own way.” This recognition of the Vietnamisation of the Australian creative contributions became a hallmark of the transference of creative and embodied ideas between choreographer and dancer.
Physical communication, between me and several dancers I knew well, extended beyond the creative work. Vietnamese people and dance professionals are generally tactile, and a touch of reassurance or an embrace, a massage in times of tension or exhaustion, light-hearted tactile ‘conversations’ during breaks and occasionally physical ‘horseplay’ were a normal part of our communication. This tactile communication is mostly same-gender based, but in the professional environment of dance, which is in itself a ‘contact art’, boundaries can be blurred. Although intercultural theorists claim humour “doesn't travel well” being a culturally rooted form of communication (Irwan 1996: 77), we found that visual jokes, laughter and a sense of fun were frequent communication tools in working and social relationships, especially with the dancers. Word play seems to be a Vietnamese national pastime and mimetic versions of puns were often the cause of hilarity, even though the Australians’ understanding was partial at best. Such moments released tensions arising from exhaustion, the working conditions and the pressure of creating a ‘successful’ product. Had we not an established empathy from this professional history, this physical outlet might not have occurred. An affectionate camaraderie meant that these non-verbal and sensory aspects of perception, understanding and communication, so well understood by dancers, became highly significant.

Intercultural Tensions

While I have suggested several ways in which this project effectively employed different communication strategies, there were also troubling tensions. Discussion of negative behaviour triggered by extreme emotion, often caused by stress, is frequently avoided in intercultural studies. In referring to this kind of behaviour Young Yun Kim (2008: 363) discusses a cycle of stress—adaptation—growth as an important dynamic of intercultural competence, suggesting that stress “presents us with an opportunity to search deep inside ourselves for new possibilities to recreate ourselves ... and learn new cultural elements”. As I have inferred, mutual affection and acceptance allowed us, as artists, to manage many complex cultural faux pas and emotional outbursts that arose not only from lack of a common verbal language, but also often from habitual cultural patterns. Poyatos (1985: 198–199) suggests that misunderstandings occur when one misreads (‘kinesic misformations’), or is unable to read (‘zero encoding’), the non-verbal signs of a culture. He further claims that ‘interference’, where we apply long-ingrained cultural behaviours, which have different manifestations in different cultures, is “the greatest interactive pitfall” (200). Anger, resentment, passive resistance or avoidance, depending on one’s cultural and personal reaction, can be the result of misunderstood communication (‘interference’) via words, reactions, looks, body language, silence, lack of eye contact and so forth.

In the Phoenix Project, when kinesic and verbal misinformation caused confusion, and fatigue set in, my behaviour became less rational and more emotional. When this resulted in angry outbursts of frustration, the Vietnamese dancers usually reacted with laughter. It is hard to gauge whether this was covering embarrassment at my loss of face or a release of tension or perhaps both. Although the Vietnamese dancers also experienced levels and periods of frustration, it was mostly manifest in avoiding eye contact or in respectful but sullen silence. The Australians, however, were more overt in their response to situations beyond their control. Ping surprised himself with an uncharacteristic reaction, saying, “I wanted us to be very smooth with each other, but when that doesn't work anymore, you can't progress the work and so you have to get angry.” Even-tempered Michael worked calmly, “but there was a quick readiness to be intolerant”, when he misunderstood his
Vietnamese colleagues. These reactions draw attention to undisclosed and uncomfortable manifestations of intercultural performance exchanges in which the stresses of dealing with cultural difference become compounded by the charged environment of artistic production.

‘Kinesic misformation’ could also be linked to the arena of power relations in exchanges between cultures. Accorded a certain power as a ‘foreign expert’, I did not have the kind of decision-making agency that I enjoy in my own country. On the other hand, a temporary loss of respect through my inadvertent inappropriate behaviour transferred power from the director to those under my direction, which of course had its positive aspects. In addition, a growing lethargy towards the end of the project was a result of external circumstances and sheer exhaustion, not apathy, lack of stamina or commitment on the part of the dancers as I had surmised. One of the dancers, Tran Van Hai, said: “We know you face a lot of difficulties when you work here, but sometimes we wish you would sympathise more with us, because that is Vietnam. You can’t change it.” This criticism of my behaviour at times also alludes to the powerlessness that Vietnamese artists feel about the censorship and control of their culture. Attempting to oppose this situation saps motivation and energy. Conversely, in my moments of frustration I was no longer able to be mem dao, or ‘go with the flow’. Such differences in dealing with divergent cultural experiences require reflexivity and alertness to situations of ‘kinesic misformation’.

Affect and Empathy – A Vietnamese Perspective

In addition to Western understandings of intercultural communication, there is a valuable Buddhist concept, which helps to explain the ‘rightness’ and inevitability of certain connective relationships (Chang and Holt 1991: 32–35). Called by the Vietnamese duyen nghiep or nhân duyen, and yuan by the Chinese, this complex notion relates to concepts of karma and dependent origination. Integral to the efficacy of yuan is the idea that “an individual’s effort can succeed only when conditions facilitate it” (37). Communication skills are not therefore always the principal factors that determine the quality or value of interpersonal interaction. Many Vietnamese believe that external forces bring people together and intertwine their destinies, and some express the view that unexplained, strongly empathetic understandings that exist between individuals of different cultures may be a result of past life connections. Despite the frustrations I experienced in visits to Vietnam, I always felt at home and some things felt strangely familiar – a kind of déjà vu experience. Many Vietnamese friends and colleagues commented that my knowledge of, and feeling for, Vietnam was unusual and they saw it as evidence of my being Vietnamese in a past life. Whether this was flattery or a genuine belief, in my 2007 return to Vietnam the sense of duyen nghiep was as strong as ever.

Cupach and Imahori define the three stages of intercultural communication as trial, enmeshment and renegotiation (1993: 123–129). In the enmeshment stage “intercultural partners begin to develop a mutually acceptable and convergent relational identity, in spite of the fact that their cultural identities are still divergent” (125). In the Phoenix Project, as I have suggested, there was growing convergence in relationships at both personal and professional levels. As the Phoenix Project participants became more enmeshed, cultural aspects of the relationship diminished and personal differentiation became more prevalent. To participate emotionally and intellectually in each other’s experiences, to empathise, was however crucial to the effectiveness of our collaboration. The communicative relationship between the Australian and Vietnamese artists depended upon a willingness to personally engage in mutual transformation, equally of importance.
to the project’s artistic outcomes. In the relative intimacy of the studio environment, it enabled us to create what Mary-Ann Hunter (quoting Michael Doneman) refers to as a ‘third space’ where one “can maintain the values of both cultures, where both can inform a meeting on common ground” (2005: 142).

Finally, the affective role of emotion and even passion is perhaps under-estimated in intercultural communication theories. Quy Duong, director of the Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre identified Michael as ‘a real artist’ because he cared so deeply.30 To explain the eventual ‘success’ of the Phoenix Project, the Vietnamese frequently used terms such as ‘love’, ‘passion’ and ‘caring’. The choice of these words stresses the emotional aspects of interaction as desirable artistic, as well as personal qualities. Vu Mai Thu, a former interpreter on several projects, explained this personal/professional relationship very simply:

In the end, all the hardships and professional difficulties, and all the love you have for the Vietnamese dancers and their love for you … it is a combination of all these things that make the work a success.31

My own memories of the project intermingle the problems and pain with its pleasures and rewards, tears with laughter, and anxiety with relief. Although a deep bond and affection continues, I am surprised at the capacity of the dancers to remember the positive elements.32 Perhaps in an intense creative project with a rewarding artistic outcome, it is not so unusual that the euphoria of the performance season minimises memories of the intercultural tensions leading up to it. Awareness of intercultural communication frameworks, as discussed in this paper, provides useful lenses to theorise the experiential complexities of the intercultural exchange in the Phoenix Project. It also demonstrates that we have the potential to move beyond binaries to a ‘third space’ where knowledge and appreciation of differing worldviews might embrace a more interdependent holism. Engaging in a process of both acculturation and deculturation can lead to intercultural adaptation. This case study contributes additional perspectives to communication theories and intercultural studies by regarding the mutual transformation and affective bonds of an experiential viewpoint. As a dance-embedded project, the non-verbal orientation of artistic practice and visual, kinaesthetic and tactile communication, reveal much about the ‘in-between’ moments of communication that allow shared intercultural understandings to emerge.

Notes

1. From 1988, following an invitation for Dance North (of which I was artistic Director) to tour Thailand, Laos, Burma (Myanmar) and Vietnam, I began once or twice yearly trips to Vietnam until 2000. These visits were often partially supported by the Australian and Vietnamese governments and sometimes at my own expense or with other sources of funding. My previous works commissioned for different projects had, in retrospect, been rather ‘safe’ dealing with Vietnamese legends and historical figures re-interpreted in a contemporary dance context. They probably (though unintentionally) provided a somewhat romantic view of Vietnam acceptable to the Ministry of Culture, which censored all cultural programmes.

2. My study of intercultural communication was undertaken whilst writing a practice-based PhD “Making Intercultural Dance in Vietnam” in which the Phoenix Project was the primary case study.
3. Other roles and key artists in Through the Eyes of the Phoenix were: Lighting, Luong Van Minh; Guest artist and Director of Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre (VNOBT), Cong Nhac; Coordinating Manager and Vice-Director of VNOBT, Pham Anh Phuong; Conductor, An Ngoc; Solo violin, Manh Hung; Singers, Manh Chung and Kim Tien; dancers and musicians of the Vietnam Opera Ballet Theatre.

4. Vietnam and its people are deeply connected through a long and tragic history of colonialism, with continual wars of conquest and independence waged for over 1,000 years until the fall of Saigon in 1975.

5. By 2007, family structures were changing and when I visited dance friends they now lived in a unit with their immediate family. However, contact with the extended family was still often on a daily basis, rather than the weekly or less often pattern in countries like Australia.

6. The most dramatic example of this communicative mode in my experience occurred in a previous project Land of Waiting Souls involving a Western-style orchestra working with Vietnam's most celebrated traditional ensemble Thang Long, to a commissioned score by Trong Dai. Our final rehearsal at the Hanoi Opera House went well and so I did not call the cast in until around 4 p.m. the following day for class and notes prior to the sold-out premiere. At 5 p.m. I was quietly informed that the Thang Long Ensemble had flown to Russia that morning. I was aghast that these plans had not been brought to my attention or somehow surfaced earlier. I was assured that the problem had been solved as the conductor and musicians had stayed behind after the final dress rehearsal the previous evening until 3 a.m. to make a recording. Unfortunately, neither I nor the dancers had been there to verify tempi and there was no time to rehearse before the opening. Sweating profusely and helplessly off stage, I could only applaud the dancers' aplomb in adjusting to tempi so speedy they looked as if a fast forward button had been pressed or as if they were in a slow motion video.

7. There is an interesting paradox within collectivist cultures in Asia and elsewhere. Communal values and social structures often exist within rigid, hierarchical national and political frameworks featuring autocratic leadership, headed by powerful and charismatic individuals. This arguably is a modern version of a past in which communal living existed within a strict hierarchy of power including the Emperor with his Generals and Mandarins. The difference of course is that the Emperor was believed to be a representative of the gods or in many cases an incarnation of a supreme heavenly being, whereas modern leaders only wield power on earth.

8. For a more detailed explanation of the ‘accented’ body in dance, see Stock 2009.


10. Cultural, political and economic reasons for this situation are discussed in Stock 2003.

11. Tran, Ngoc Hien, personal interview (translated by Tran Thanh Mai), Hanoi, 9 December 1997.

12. Tran, Bich Huong, personal interview (translated by Tran Thanh Mai), Hanoi, 9 December 1997.


15. An intercultural trade mission might pay for expensive, skilled interpreters but arts projects rarely have these funds.


17. Pearce, Michael, personal interview, Melbourne, 12 June 1997.


19. Tran, Bích Huong, personal interview (translated by Tran Thanh Mai), Hanoi, 9 December 1997.

20. Le, Vu Long, personal interview (translated by Tran Thanh Mai), Hanoi, 6 February 1998.


22. In Vietnam designers work on a commission basis so the Vietnamese artists were surprised to see how closely Michael collaborated with the rest of the team and the fact that he attended rehearsals.

23. Le, Vu Long, op. cit.

24. Tran, Van Hai, op. cit.

25. Some cultural taboos are rapidly breaking down amongst young people in Vietnam. I have observed easier physical social contact between the sexes as contemporary globalised culture permeates lifestyles.

26. The dance studio was a ramshackle stand-alone building in the middle of a field in which buffaloes roamed, in the midst of a run-down arts compound. Electricity often did not work, the floor surface verged on dangerous and we were often interrupted by workers and soldiers coming in to observe during their work breaks, smoking and chatting loudly. There was no door to close to prevent such interruptions.

27. Sun, Ping, personal interview, Melbourne, 13 June 1997.

28. Pearce, Michael, op. cit.

29. Duyen means predestined and nghiep is the word for karma, whilst nhân duyên can be translated as predestined affinity. These terms often refer to lifelong partnerships such as marriage.

30. Pearce, Michael, personal communication.


32. Interviews are not always reliable. Therefore, despite the frankness and informality of my interviews with the dancers, I acknowledge a favourable bias in many comments.
Works Cited


