**‘Losing Selfhood’ and Regaining Autonomy Through Artistic Endeavours—**

**A Stance in Socio-political and Individual Spheres**

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**Abstract**

*This essay examines a phenomenon in sensibility and personhood, Chinese non-individuated selfhood in this case. As David Hall and Roger Ames (2003) assert, Chinese people have no sense of autonomy—their individuated selves exist only in relation to other obligatory roles ‘to the various groupings to which they belong’ (p. 9). Drawing on Eastern and Western perspectives, I explicate the phenomenon of ‘cultural sensibility’ embedded in Sociopolitical and individual spheres. In exploring aesthetic experience, focusing particularly on dance practice, I argue in this essay that artistic endeavours help recoup one’s sense of individuated autonomy. To substantiate this argument, I offer a view that further suggests how one’s ontological and epistemological awareness can both be embedded in three orientations—somatic self, situational self, and reciprocal self. Thus, I hope to show how this ontological and epistemological status of artistic experience may have educational significance for cultivating individuals’ moral sensibility and responsibility towards both individuality and collectiveness.*

Keywords: selfhood; autonomy; cultural sensibility; Chinese individuality; aesthetic experience; ontology, epistemology, dance

A man can be free in any kind of state.

--Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

**Introduction**

If the statement above preassumes that human beings are metaphysically free, the assumption also presents us with part of the problem that I shall discuss in this essay. Autonomy is often recognized as a central value in moral and political philosophy (Paul et al., 2003, *Introduction*), as is shown in the writings from Confucius (2006 version), Spinoza (2006 version) to Kant (1996/2008). Personhood or individuality, the related concept, necessitates free choice by its very nature. While there are fundamental disagreements over how autonomy should be understood, the understanding of personhood involves cultural sensibility. Thus, individuality must also be understood in relation to socio-political sphere.

Let me start by recalling how David Hall and Roger Ames (in their *Understanding Order: The Chinese Perspective*, 2003) view the personhood of Chinese individuality in relation to ‘otherness.’ They argue, ‘The defect of individualism from the Chinese perspective is its challenge to a ritually ordered society in which the boundaries of the self may be only vaguely delineated’ (p. 9). To understand Hall and Ames, the Chinese conception of personhood, in stark contrast to the Western democratic sense, excludes ‘natural rights, free choice, independence, autonomy’ (p. 2). In other words, such characteristics of personhood, in Chinese tradition, are regarded as abnormal and undesirable, or as ‘sociopathic.’

Further in Hall’s and Ames’s assertion, the Chinese have no sense of autonomy; their

individuated selves only exist in relation to other obligatory roles ‘to the various groupings to which they belong’ (p. 9). In this sort of mindset, there is hardly a sense of Self (after capitalized here, ‘self’ refers to an individuated sense of self) that stands in isolation. In stripping off each of the complex roles and functions associated with someone’s obligations, there remains nothing to constitute a coherent personality, as in Hall and Ames’ expression: ‘No soul, no mind, no ego, not even an “I know not what”’ (p. 9). For them, the Chinese ‘sense of personal identity is determined in part by tension with others’ (p. 9). These words describe a vivid image of completely non-autonomous individual-self, clearly suggesting that there is no freedom in a Chinese personhood in any meaningful sense, either.

If what Hall and Ames contend is true, to which I agree to some extent, and if there is a good deal of evidence to suggest such an individuated image of the Chinese people (although I am not sure there is not), there may arise, at the same time, some question about such contention. Nonetheless, in their generous understanding of different ‘cultural sensibility’ between West and East, Hall and Ames lucidly point out the cultural root of Chinese non-individuality, ‘the overriding concern of the Chinese has always been the establishment of harmonious relationships with social ambience’ (p. 2). This I shall explicate to reinforce in the next section.

It is for this individuated truthfulness that I am compelled, as a product of then a tradition and later as an emigrated beneficiary of the democratic society, to rethink and attempt to ‘dissect’ the entirety of my own Self, through ‘subtracting’ the obligatory layers that have constituted my own persona. It seems true, in any case, that the constitution of one’s existential being is born into and bound to a complex matrix of roles and duties in a ritually organized and harmonious order (e.g., Chinese society). In my view, this inevitably points to an ad rem fact that freedom of individuality can be linked in the same way with any socio-political order (and I argue that it must be so), even in a democratic society. This view, by any means, suggests that a person’s freedom or autonomy would be quite relevant to socialization and politics. The relevance lies between the personal and collective, between the individual and societal. Any concept (e.g., either individualism or autonomy), as Douglas Den Uyl (2003) argues (and I would agree), ‘with morally normative characteristics must, ipso facto, be connected to the political in some way’ (p. 31). Further on this view, I would argue that there exists a constant dialectic between these two spheres, individual and socio-political, which gives rise to the dynamics of cultural sensibility, in which conceptions are deeply embedded. True personhood or individual selfhood is the dialectic outcome of such exchange of cultural sensibilities.

The religious writer Gerald Heardonce characterized how Europeans, Indians, and Chinese view their civilizations in discussing the fundamental question that the thinkers and seers of each of these traditions would presumably ask. According to Heard (as cited in Hall & Ames, 2003) this question for the European, whose curiosity about the nature of external world led to development of the natural and social sciences, was ‘*Where* am I?’ The question asked by Indians – who ‘as a consequence discovered subtle techniques of spiritual self-examination and articulation’ (p. 3) – was ‘*Who* am I?’ The Chinese asked the question ‘*What* am I?’ answering the question ‘in terms of rituals and roles establishing the parameters of one’s identity as a social being’ (p. 3). But the question about the Self – ‘Who am I?’ – is, however, hardly an arbitrary one for me as it might be for others. Rather, it is an intrinsic as well as a perennial question for most Chinese people, too, I believe, although the question itself rarely comes to us in the sense of a quest for an answer. By this, I mean that if I steer myself out of the philosophical dichotomy (Self and Other) which suggests that ‘to be “autonomous” is *not* to need others,’ (Grimshaw 1986, p. 185) the perceptions I have of myself, therefore, are in the camouflaged forms of metaphysical personhood, or simply my relational personhood, – a tacit knowing of the Self and the Other. To recognize my emotional and my physical being, I tacitly recognize my interdependence with others. My ‘distinctive character of the self becomes vague and diffuse,’ to refer back to Hall and Ames (2003, p. 9), and its existential functions are always situated in its various social contexts, which define or diffuse, sanction or deny my personhood.

The key point here is that a person’s individualism may seem lost during the exchange of the individual and socio-political spheres, as is characteristic of Chinese personhood in Hall’s and Ames’ assertion. The characteristics of personhood, when viewed from such democratic perspective, force us to face the most demanding of all dialectics: the dialectics of selfhood and otherhood, of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ in the social and political ambience. I call this view the dialectic on the necessary link between individualism and socialization. In such dialectic relationship, an individual acquires a personal identity, and, at the same time, assimilates into the existing social order by learning the norms, values, behaviour, and social skills appropriate to his or her social sphere, whereby the dialectic selfhood gives rise to individualism and autonomy.

To further complicate my argument about the dialectic of losing and recouping, I make a case for artistic autonomy to illustrate that through artistic practice, a new dialectic (a regained autonomy) can be achieved between individualism and socialization. Artistic autonomy, which I call here a form of recouped individuality, encompasses a complex and, I think, deeply meaningful’ nature of human’s aesthetic and ethical autonomy. Artistic activity, dance by illustration of this particular case in my discussion, provides a dialectic opportunity for playing diverse roles and/or duties, thus living collectively, and, at the same time, autonomously. For dancing allows one to excess the deep body-mind interaction as well as ‘Self’-‘Other’ connection.

**Relating Ontology of Personhood and Autonomy**

If someone says, ‘The sky *is* blue,’ or ‘I *am* happy,’ such classic statements of an ontological state of being are self-evident and require no explanation or clarification. Although on other occasions an epistemological question may arise – ‘How is the perception conceived of－ from a viewpoint of an objectivist or a subjectivist?’ – the meaning of the statement, per se, is, however, manifest. Nonetheless, if I say: ‘Dance is part of my autonomy,’ (a voice that virtually awakened me from my dream one morning) I make this claim unintelligible and incomprehensible to some who are less experienced in this particular sort of somatic experience and the claim calls for further explication and elucidation.

First, I shall explain briefly why I make such claim that one’s autonomy can be perceived through one’s (purportedly-) somatic experience, such as dancing, in particular. A particular image of a ‘lost personhood’ has been hovering over my mind, that is, a conjured up ‘impression’ of a person rapped with every layer other than the ‘self’ stands or exists only in relation to the every ‘other.’ The selfhood of the person is, therefore, buried in every other but one’s-own self.

Before I proceed further, it would be helpful here to define autonomy and freedom. Autonomy is Ancient Greek word, *autonomia* (*autonomos*), composed of *auto,* (‘self’) and *nomos* (‘law’). What it means is rather literal, ‘one gives oneself one’s won law’; namely, ‘self-regulation’ (‘self-government’) or acting according to ‘one’s own laws.’ And freedom, the synonym of autonomy, means ‘self-action,’ or acting according to ‘one’s own will.’ Following the definitions, individual’s ‘self-action,’ as living by one’s own will (freedom) seems to convey no implications for political circumstances, nor does ‘self-regulation,’ as living by one’s own laws (autonomy). In this connection, it would seem that we have separated the rhetoric of autonomy from both its philosophical content and its socio-political context. Yet, if suspending one’s individuality or personhood in such context, what then would autonomy mean and entail?

*‘Losing-Selfhood’: A Regaining Moment?*

I shall now turn retrospectively to the roots of thinking in Chinese tradition with regard to how personhood is shaped. As part of cultural sensibility, the gist of Chinese philosophy is the *conversion of yin-yang*, a dialectic conversion or transformation of two apparently opposite or contrary forces. The *yin-yang* forces are interconnected, interdependent, and thus complementary by their very nature. The aspects of Chinese sensibility consist of the fundamental principles of traditional Chinese medicine, arts (e.g., artistic creation, calligraphy), Chinese marshal arts (e.g., *taijuquan*, shalingquan, *qigong*), dietary, diplomacy – in short, in every aspect of life! And Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have shaped such culture and thinking.

In social and political practice in relation to selfhood, Confucius, who represents one of the three dominant traditions, taught his students about their duties as a person in relation to others. He said in Book One of *The Analects* (2006): ‘A young man’s duty is to behave well to his parents at home and to his elders abroad’ (p. 3). This reflects a fundamental view of individuated personhood, in that one views or positions oneself always in relation with others. An analogous teaching is to be found in a story in Book Five of *The Analects*. One day while two students (Yan Yuan and Ji Lu) were waiting upon him, Confucius set out a task for them: each was to reveal his wishes. Ji Lu said first,

I should like to have carriages and horses, clothes and fur rugs,

share them with my friends and feel no annoyance if they

were returned to me the worse for wear. (Confucius 2006, p. 62)

Yan Yuan said his wish,

I should like never to boast of my good qualities nor make a fuss

about the trouble I take on behalf of others. (p. 62)

In response to Ji Lu’s request, Confucius said his own wish,

In dealing with the aged, to be of comfort to them; in dealing with

friends, to be of good faith with them; in dealing with the young,

to cherish them. (p. 63).

It is not difficult to discern Confucius’ ideas about personal morality: the central role of individual moral activity. Such cultivation can only take place by engaging and maintaining relationships with other people in a social context. For Confucius, humans are sustained by these coexisting conditions. Reverence for the past and for the ancestors, a profound concern with ritual, and a strong emphasis on the importance of filial duty and of the father-son relationship are aspects of Confucianism that have perhaps made it seem somewhat alien to the western tradition.

Consider ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in the family relationship. Mengzi (2006 version), the important figure of Confucianism, affirms that

The core of benevolence is to be filial to one’s parents; the core of

righteousness is to yield to one’s elder brothers; the core of wisdom is to

know the meaning of benevolence and righteousness and adhere to

them steadfastly… (Li Lou, Part One, Chapter 27)

For Mengzi, one’s benevolence parallels with one’s filial piety. He says, ‘Whom should be served first? Parents should be served first. What should be kept first? Moral integrity should be kept first…’ (Chapter 19). The command, ‘不孝有三,无后为大’ has straitjacketed the selfhood of the young for thousand years! (‘There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants.’ Chapter, 27). For the notion that one should a son to carry on the family name presupposes the value and duties of the personhood (e.g., one has to take a concubine so as to have a son to carry on one’s family name in the future). Stepping out of this deep-rooted thinking of the duties of ‘Self’ for ‘Others,’ I shall now return to the discussion of one’s relatedness in terms of what Hall and Ames state about the notion of selfhood and the relative, obligatory roles bearing on such selfhood.

It seems true that the issue of Self has been forgotten, or rather, has never been a question for me as for most Chinese people, according to Hall and Ames (2003). Given that recognition, we can say in other words that our needs, desires, and emotions are deeply structured by the social relationship under which we live (Grimshaw 1986). Thus, our autonomy has to go hand in hand with our dependence upon its shaping, evolving, and working for changes in the contexts of these obligatory roles and relationships. This certainly requires our continuing efforts to understand the relationships between our own personhood and the socially structured harmony. And so, too, does it require, following Jean Grimshaw, the conceptions we have of ourselves, the exigencies we experience, and the immediate and wider circumstances of our lives.

*‘Self’ – ‘Other’ Interdependence*

Without an Other there is no Self, without Self no choosing one thing

rather than another.

—Zhuangzi 1

Everything we talk about, mean, and are related to is in being in one

way or another. What and how we ourselves are is also in being. Being

is found in thatness and whatness, reality, the objective presence of

things (*Vorhandenheit*), subsistence, validity, existence (*da-sein*), and in

the ‘there is’ (*es gibt*).

—Heidegger (1953/1996, p. 5)

Here, I draw a connection between the Heideggerian ‘thatness’ of being and Zhuangzi’s no-other-and-no-self (or vice versa) teaching. Both perspectives maintain that the essence of ontology is always relational and dialectical. This view is found and developed in many philosophers and thinkers, either ancient or contemporary, West or East, but only from different angles or with varied focus. With respect to my discussion of Chinese individuated selfhood in relation to its social constituents, I turn to Grimshaw’s (1986) observation: ‘Philosophers in Hegelian and Marxist traditions have argued that the self is necessarily social’ (p. 169). In the Hegelian argument, being aware of oneself as a person involves being recognized by others as such and human beings cannot either recognize or meet their needs in isolation from other people. Francis Herbart Bradley (1876/1927) supports this view that the self is essentially social when he states:

If we suppose the world of relations in which [a person] was born and bred, never to have been, then we suppose the very essence of him not to be; if we take that away, we have taken him; and hence he is not now an individual, in the sense of owing nothing to the sphere of relations in which he finds himself, but does contain those relations within himself as belonging to his very being. (p. 166)

Within this framework, I try not to emphasize the abstract individualism or psychological egoism that may arise as a stumbling block for my effort to rekindle a sense of recognition and understanding of Self per se. It is in all these relations emphasized above that I recognize the very essence of my individuality, in the sense of owing everything to the sphere of relations in which I find my real self. My related selfhood owes itself to the roles of parents, siblings, teachers, neighbours, and superiors, to name a few. My sense of real self, related to and contrasted with the aforementioned ‘roles’, is viewed, in Grimshaw’s (1986) words, as the ‘“underlying” socially produced self (in rather the same sort of way biology is often seen as underlying socialization),’ and ‘[H]ere, the ‘inner core’ of self seems to be *contrasted* in some way with what is social’ (p. 141). I further understand an indispensable interdependence with my social sphere in ‘the way in which *all* needs and desires are socially mediated’ (p. 135). This notion leads us to see how Confucius’ personal duties and morality are related to a socially harmonious order.

This view of Self brings me back to my discovery of autonomy through my sense expressions, my philosophizing, or my deep-sleep dreaming by recognizing that these socially-mediated needs and desires presuppose my own individualism of interests, following Grimshaw: namely, that my own interests can be sharply distinguished from those of other people. And in this process of discovering my individuality is seen

[A]s one of undoing or unwinding the layers of socialization which conceal the inner core. This sort of view of self has implications for ways of thinking about needs and interests and about the relationship between self and others… (p. 141)

In this view, Chinese owe themselves to the various groupings to which they belong and their individuality is layered with manifold obligatory roles. And the core of their self-autonomy remains as nothing if those layers are undone, unwound, or stripped away. For this reason, I shall affirm through my experience that there is such an inner core self, a self that is composed of no emptiness but, rather, is socially constructed, always in relatedness to and with others. That is the metaphysical nature of personhood.

**Rekindling Artistic Autonomy – A Losing-Regaining Dialectic**

For me, the sense of metaphysical personhood is an aesthetic form of life, to recall Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1993/2003),in which he seeks to explain why aesthetic forms of life, such as music and poetry, are fundamental and the rational is secondary. Nietzscheundermines the traditional separation between rational-philosophical discourse and creative-artistic expression, believing that a certain mystical disposition of mind senses first, and after that follows the poetic idea.

In concert with Nietzsche’s preference of aesthetic expression over rational expression, I underscore the aesthetic somatic expression in creating, and sustaining autonomy of Self. More importantly, I tend to develop an intimate awareness of the qualities of objects and subjects I encounter and my aptness for interacting in the fluid harmonies of self sphere, natural sphere, and social sphere – these spheres are embodied in what Confucius’ considered a harmonious and balanced strength, and in *conversion of losing and regaining* – a new dialectic. Because of my sustained efforts through continuous dancing and poetic expression, I become more fully aware of my obligatory roles constituted within other-than-self relationships. I also gain and maintain a complete personhood through the exertions of somatic practice, wherein my individuated self harmonizes with social and natural personhoods. This awareness or recognition may be challenged as a metaphysical ideal, although Martin Buber feels that the sense of self is similarly balanced as he terms it as awareness of both I (oneself) and Thou (the other). In other words, such a sense of self balanced between individuation and relationality may be challenged as being purely metaphysical, hence not ‘real’ or ‘practical.’ I shall, however, not shirk my responsibility for a further exploration later.

Coming to understanding the Nietzschean idea of an aesthetic form of life, I gain a sense of relational individuality by *losing myself* in a complex of roles and functions amongst collective associations and social obligations. In other words, I have come to understand the interdependent relationship of losing selfhood and regaining selfhood, from the viewpoint of their reciprocity and coexistence, as a way towards a state of harmony and balance, both for an individual and for a ritually organized social order. In attempt to further illustrate how metaphysical personhood is shaped and regained in an aesthetic form of life (e.g., in dancing) and how this losing and regaining coexist within individuality and collectivity, I shall, in the subsequent passages, explore how losing oneself is a way towards a regaining of oneself in a context encompassed by attaching to and detaching from otherness – as if wrapped up with and subtracted from the different obligatory layers. With this in mind, I shall discuss how I recoup my sense of Self in the ‘*What* am I?’ orientation granted in Heard’s suggestion, focusing on how the three orientations, ‘*Who*, *where*, and *what* am I?’ emerge from my somatic expression – dancing.

*‘Who Am I?’ as Somatic Autonomy*

Maybe it is because this enquiry of ‘W*ho* am I?’ has haunted me so long that my

somatic awareness and my epistemological soma spur me to respond in my sleep and/or dream. My sense of postmodern ambiguity crystallizes in my sleep into a self-declamation: ‘Dancing is part of my autonomy!’ It is my proprietary being. My ontological being of personhood – a Chinese individuated self, considered a non-autonomous being – finds its root in somatic proprioception and cognition. For, self awareness arises when I fully activate my physical senses in my experiential engagement of my somatic being in dance. In dancing the senses of touch (feeling my breath, muscles, bones), sight (the shades of light and dark and colour), and hearing (the music and other sounds) create crucial affinities between my emotions and somatic sensations—in these affinities I make sense of my beingness. In alignment with Thomas Hanna’s (1986) lucid expression, ‘Somatic awareness allows a person to glean wisdom from within’ (p. 6), I would suggest that my somatic awareness incites me to glean my sensuous existence and independence from within, within myself and with others.

I dance to keep myself intact from pulls, ties, knots, tensions, and restrictions. It is precisely in this zone of activating, animating, and validating every cell, every part of my body, that I feel my real self, my actual existence, and my reciprocal relations to others. It is in the midst of my somatic exploration, revelation in relation to my other entities (mind, heart) that I live my soma, feel my breath, sense my voluntary moment and sensation. I can control the weight of my body and judge every effort of my muscles in such revelation. I then gain my proprietary autonomy. To reiterate, my sense of an autonomous self arises from dance experience because it allows me to develop relationships, through sensual experience, with my immediate (or less immediate) surroundings. For, we cannot, as Heesoon Bai (2004) lucidly expresses, ‘sensibly speak of the body in a way that is outside our experience’ (p. 57). As such, dance allows me to develop a more autonomous (because it is self-initiated) and yet a very much relational sense of Self. Thus, my simple claim to know who I am suffices to establish a basis for knowing who I am inside my own experiences. I dance to experience my individuated autonomy and creation. As the instigator of my dance movements, I not only move my muscles and bones, nor merely copy or imitate; but also develop an intimate relationship between my own self and my audience as an autonomous individual, expressing herself in and through dance. In the quest for an Individuated Self, I seek acceptance and solace in cosmic regularity and in bringing a responsive self to the ritually (or maybe chaotically) ordered society (as perceived in the Chinese perspective) in which ‘the boundaries of the self may be only vaguely delineated’ (Hall & Ames 2003, p. 9).

This in essence implies a truly integrated mind-body-spirit of human nature by challenging a mind/body polarizing view; it also implies a dynamic integration between self and other. Thus, through my somatic voice and expressions across over the ‘vaguely delineated boundaries of self,’ I echo, ‘I am *I’* (a declaration of a real self!) in the drama of collective and social harmony. As an individuated self in dance, I am not only intact, but also unified, by emanating fluency from my somatic transitional flow in developing stylistic control. My self-being in this context may not be lesser manifestation of the real me. It is because my creative self-being overflows and radiates out from what has sensuously and emotionally constituted ‘*Who* I am!’ – a question of the necessity of my real self.

*‘Where Am I?’ as Situational Autonomy*

In dance movement, I create contrasts of myself in and through the intricacies of space, time, force, and body awareness, revelation, justification and appropriateness. All these are my somatic conceptualizations through which I position myself at a macro level in an imaginary world—an organized social order or a cosmic system. Yet, at the micro level (on the delimited dance floor or stage), I manoeuvre and punctuate my controlled sense of unity and autonomy by means of temporal emanation, and spatial entrance and existence. I curve, straighten, stretch, and zigzag my soma and mind through a pathway of a self-revelation, and an epistemological awareness of my independence in relation to the stage, the lights, closed-or-open-walls and darkness, a silence that prohibits anything else, and the stares of the viewers. I place myself within a self-space and a general space and move at the intersection of self-governing space and a restricted space, too often and in essence, always between, across, and beyond the boundaries of individuated self and collective self—a private being and a public being, in this case, the dancer and the spectators.

Through a formal structure of a beginning, middle, and end of my somatic expressions, absence and present—all that is characteristic of a complete dance movement, I find myself navigated to a linear and multidimensional spatial order. In this delimited order, my somatic response moves at three levels of verticality – high, centre, and low – and in various directions, forward, backward, right and left, up and down. My focus is through a single lens in which my somatic entity (soma/body) is placed, enveloped and encompassed by the aforementioned multidimensional spatial order. It is in these structured forms that I find my proprietary autonomy existing as an integral part of the entirety of the dance. In this sense autonomy becomes a metaphysical placing and positioning between the independence of the individual and the interdependence of self and otherness. Through the reflections, associations, thinking, intentionality, and situatedness that emerge from interactive and significant somatic movements in time and space, I am immersed in what I know as ‘*Where* I am!’ – a question of the structure of my real self.

*‘What Am I?’ as Reciprocal Autonomy*

In connecting to self-action, or free will, dancing offers a patter for thinking about the self and the other, the way in which bodies exist in relationship to each other. The sense of time mediated through the speed and rhythm of my body kindles the sparks of my epistemic sensations of selfhood. Cognizant of my self-ruling existence, my own pulse and breath, fast or slow, are manifestly displayed in my autonomous dance pattern. I then gain a sense of independence from other obligatory patterns and roles. I, therefore, possess my own rhythm of existence. A strong sensibility of and sensitivity to selfhood emerges from the force of my movement, interspersed by my energy (smooth and sharp), by the weight projected through my somatic awareness (strong and gentle), and by the flow of my somatic and cognitive manifestations (free and bound). It is along with the flows and restrictions, participations and interactions that I find my autonomy as if within the bound order of a societal collectiveness. This kindled sense of my autonomous self is collectively sensible; that is, I’m sensible of interdependent relationships with the bound flow in dance movement on the stage: near or far, alone or connected, mirroring or shadowing, in unison or contrast, over or under, above or below, around or through, beside or between, centralizing or dispersing. My autonomy, existing in the on-and-off balance of selfhood and otherness, individuality and collectiveness, arises within these qualities of experience, ‘the meaning of which are always shifting and reconfiguring’ (Bai 2004, p. 57).

The somatic dimension of my being thus continually interacts with all other dimensions, in an always-shifting-reconfiguring fashion. In these interactions I am cognizant of the independence of my somatic experience and my separateness from the world that exists in a complex intricacy of interactions and associations and that relates to the reciprocity between selfhood and otherhood. It is within this reciprocity that I am simultaneously freed from the divided attendance and obligations demanded in socializing within the ritually organized system, and, as well, I am also seeing that my *continuity*, or *contiguity*, exists in my interdependence with others, or in a larger social order.

A sense of understanding thereby looms in the social and structural orders, in an engagement and development of philosophic understanding of the reciprocity between Self and Other: ‘the transfusion of the self with the other’ (Bai 2004, p. 59).This transfusional phenomenon is what Zhaungzi described as ‘in a trance, a state in which “I lose me”.’ This state of being makes a distinctive contribution to the sense of my autonomy: of knowing ‘*What* I am!’ – a question of the reciprocity of my real self.

**Recouping Autonomy: An Educative Moment**

Where I am; who I am, too. Who I am; what I am, too. It is in this immersion and

relationality that I understand my self-autonomy in relation to my various obligatory roles and functions within the larger societal context – wherein I lose myself and find myself. Acquiring such self-understanding reminds me of Heidegger’s (1953/1996) assertion that ‘being is being-with.’ He says,

This understanding, like all understanding, is not a knowledge derived

from cognition, but a primordially existential kind of being which first

makes knowledge and cognition possible. Knowing oneself is grounded

in primordially understanding being-with. (p. 124)

My understanding of Heideggerian ‘being-with’ reflects my sense of what is real: that is, self is ‘self-with’ and knowing is ‘knowing-with.’

I have explored an ontological autonomy that is invariably embedded in a somatic self, situational self, and reciprocal self, and, hence, have made an effort to offer a way of achieving an emergent awareness of the ontological complexity of Self and Other – the artistic autonomy. What I have experienced in this somatic exploration is that our understanding and recognition of selfhood must be invariably changing, adjusting, and recouping within Self and with Other. I have experienced ways to recoup and sustain my (and perhaps, by extension, our) divided attention, intention, and obligation through various sense experiences – flow, spontaneity, situatedness, extension, attention, intention, creativity. Our autonomous entities exist interdependently with contexts in which we find ourselves: within various social relationships, as well as within our own sense experiences, perceptions, emotions, affinities, attentions, and intentions. Dancing as a mediation of adjusting to a cultural sensibility. If Hall and Ames are right that we can be ‘prepared to appreciate the Chinese ways of thinking, dance, in my belief, that entails a way for individuals, West or East, share the necessary articulation and expression of beliefs and desires, feelings and emotions. All these together shape a common sensibility and humanity.

I thus conclude that individuated selfhood resides within its very yielding to other selves and is further sustained from its very emergence from them. Individuality and collectiveness are reciprocally situated and the real value of autonomy is inherent in its embeddedness in its own outsideness. Somatic practice is an aesthetic experience of one’s intrinsic valuing, by means of which we can achieve self-knowledge, self-identity and self-autonomy. I offer a view that further suggests how one’s ontological and epistemological awareness can both be embedded in three orientations – somatic self, situational self, and reciprocal self. As my exploration of aesthetic experience demonstrated above, this experience is interfused between Self and Other. Such interfusion is both an ontological and epistemological one, which appreciates an educational transformation in gaining individuals’ moral sensibilities toward and responsibilities for both individuality and collectiveness. And, this sort of understanding and knowledge achieved through somatic and aesthetic experiences are something we ought to work at; and something that can only be had by working at it. It is an attainment, an accomplishment, and not a given.

**Notes**

1. Zhuangzi, also known as Chuang Tzu, is regarded as the co-founder with Laozi or Lao Tzu,

of Daoism/Taoism. See Angus Charles Graham, *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981; Repr. Boston: Hackett, 2000), p. 51.

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