

Gaining access into the Beijing Dance Academy through the Back Gate

An introduction to my time spent observing at the elite Chinese dance school

By Caroline Berg

Obtaining permission from the University of Iowa to leave fall semester early for me to pursue a project in China was an amiable process. It was the forbidding stance of the Foreign Affairs Office at the Beijing Dance Academy that required some underhanded scheming.

Six days before our scheduled departure, University of Iowa dance professor Eloy Barragán read these e-mailed words to me over the phone Sunday night, Nov. 29:

Dear Eloy,

We are surprised to know that the student still wants to come with you, as we have said clearly in both emails of Nov. 2 that we couldn't receive her even if she came.

Since our Academy only invited you and did not agree with the student's project, even if she came, she wouldn't be allowed to attend your classes and rehearsals, not to mention documenting them. As friends, we suggest you not bringing her. If you insisted on bringing her, you should be responsible for all the possible inconveniences and problems.

We hope you'll understand well and clearly this time. Please confirm.

Best regards,
Shelley Zhang
Foreign Affairs Office
Beijing Dance Academy

Eloy had originally invited me in October to come observe and document his two-week stint working with ballet students while residing inside the gated Beijing Dance Academy compound. Eloy and I had seemingly received approval from the school's director, Ou Lu, for me to gain access into Eloy's rehearsals. Turns out, Ms. Zhang inside the academy's Foreign Affairs Office was convinced otherwise.

... Too bad. That plane ticket I had already bought cost more than a few lollipops. I was going to China.

Eloy and I arrived at the Beijing Capital International Airport late Sunday night on Dec. 6. Inside the baggage claim, we hugged and wished one another good-bye so that we would not be seen together at the welcomes gate. Ms. Zhang was waiting for Eloy, and Eloy only. Meanwhile, I sought unauthorized refuge at my friend's dormitory at Beijing's Tsinghua University.

The following morning, I visited the "*China Daily* mansion," as editor-in-chief Liu Weiling called the office building for the Chinese-run, English-language newspaper. There I met with the features editor Ji Tao to talk about working on the documentary project together in order to gain access into the Beijing Dance Academy. Ji Tao's advised me to give it a couple of days, then go ahead into the academy and attend Eloy's classes.

"I don't understand what the big deal is," Ji Tao said. Neither did 99% of the rest of us.

Later that Monday afternoon, I meandered for a couple hours over to the academy and effortlessly passed through the north gate into the Beijing Dance Academy compound. I wandered through the inner driveways, past the cafeteria and main dance building, to find myself at the south gate and the location of the foreign student dormitory where Eloy was staying. For three consecutive days I met Eloy in this building without issue. Subsequently, I e-mailed Eloy Wednesday night to ask if I could move into his spacious, two-bed bedroom. However, Eloy informed me that someone had confronted him and inquired about "that girl" who had been paying visits. This little scare set us back another day.

Finally, Friday, we bit the bullet. The hour and fifteen-minute daily commutes from Tsinghua University to the Beijing Dance Academy, however, would have to continue.

Conclusion

A Look Back and Review

Working alongside Eloy to do this documentary project at the Beijing Dance Academy confronted a series of barriers. Each barrier required a different set of problem-solving.

First, gaining access into Eloy's classes involved logistical alterations. Instead of having the privilege to live on site with Eloy inside the academy compound, I had to seek my own accommodations. I was fortunate enough to have a friend living at Beijing's Tsinghua University and willing to provide me room and board. However, even this arrangement entailed sneaking through the back door. Dorm security required guests to sign in and out during their visits and leave the building every night before 11:00. In the end, the act of walking through any of the dance academy's guarded gates was non-confrontational. It was only through a paranoid office's e-mails that I was temporarily cyber-blocked access.

Second, as a native Spanish speaker from Mexico with an English accent and essentially a five-word Chinese vocabulary, Eloy had to stretch his resources and creativity to communicate with his students. He contacted a UI student studying abroad in Beijing to help translate a few of his rehearsals; otherwise, his star pupil Weiting did what she could to bridge the language gap between Eloy and her classmates. Still, Eloy exhausted himself repeating instructions. One female student, Ranyi, admitted it took her at least two times to listen to his instructions before she could absorb the meanings.

Third, the vocal Chinese ballet student, Weiting, did not fit into the Beijing Dance Academy mold. She disliked the uniform classical ballet structure that wiped the creativity she thirsted for in dance. Eloy's guest choreography was

her first real opportunity to work with a professional on contemporary ballet, which is her true love. The barrier that confronts her ambitions is the immigration paperwork that would allow her to move to the U.S. and work with an American dance company.

Barriers only test your creativity and drive if you look at them from the right perspective. I was able to overcome my barrier. Eloy succeeded in communicating with his Chinese students. With Weiting's outgoing personality, dramatic flair, and affinity for the English language, I have confidence that she can find a route to America after her graduation this year from the Beijing Dance Academy.