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Locating Chinese Dance: Bodies in Place, History, and Genre

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INTRODUCTION

Locating Chinese Dance

Bodies in Place, History, and Genre

I stand with twenty other students, mostly women, in a spacious dance studio at the Beijing Dance Academy, facing a wall of mirrors. We are wearing white jackets with “water sleeves” (*shuixiu*)—long panels of silk attached to the ends of our sleeves that stretch about two feet in width and twice the length of our arms. Since we are not moving, the sleeves gather in pearly puddles on the floor. We watch as our teacher, Shao Weiqiu, explains the next movement. “When you are casting out and returning the sleeve, it’s important that you allow the sleeve to move at its own speed. Once you give the initial stimulus, let the sleeve do the rest.” She turns toward the mirror to demonstrate. The pianist begins to play, and Professor Shao stands with feet together and arms hanging at her sides. Using four counts, she slowly breathes out and sinks into bent knees while lowering her eyes. Then, she rises again for four more counts and gradually lifts her right elbow diagonally forward. When she reaches the highest point, she snaps her arm out straight, palm down, making sure to flick her wrist and spread her thumb and fingers wide. Her movement sends the sleeve unfurling into a flat sheet that hangs temporarily suspended in midair. As the sleeve floats down, Professor Shao follows it, lowering gradually again while keeping her arm out in line with the sleeve. With the fabric now spread on the floor in front of her, she begins the second part of the exercise. Stepping back with her right foot, she flaps the back of her right hand up and then rotates her forearm and tugs sharply back from the elbow, keeping her hand at waist level and parallel to the floor. The sleeve lifts from the ground and paints an airborne parabola in her direction. As if by magic, the sleeve returns to Professor Shao’s open palm, gathering in a perfect accordion-shaped pile between her thumb and forefinger. She closes her fist around the wad of fabric and turns to us: “OK, now you try.”

Water sleeve is one of several dozen distinct dance styles that make up Chinese dance, a contemporary concert genre that developed during the mid-twentieth century and is widely practiced around the world today. In the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC or China), Chinese dance is most commonly known as *Zhongguo wudao* (Chinese dance) or *minzu wudao* (national dance). Among Sinophone communities abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia, the term *Huazu wudao* (dance of the Hua people) is also used. In all three the term *wudao*, meaning “dance,” can also be shorted to *wu*. Since the 1950s, dance scholars and practitioners in China have generally recognized two subcategories of Chinese dance: Chinese classical dance (*Zhongguo gudian wu*) and Chinese national folk dance (*Zhongguo minzu minjian wu*).¹ Initially, Chinese classical dance was derived from local theater forms known collectively as *xiqu* (pronounced “hsee-tchü”), such as Peking opera and Kunqu. Now, Chinese classical dance consists of the early *xiqu*-based style (which includes water sleeve), as well as the more recently developed Dunhuang and Han-Tang styles, among others. Chinese national folk dance has from the beginning combined Han styles (such as Northeast *yangge*, Shandong *yangge*, Anhui *huagudeng*, and Yunnan *huadeng*) with ethnic minority styles (such as Uyghur, Mongol, Korean, Tibetan, and Dai). As in the case of Chinese classical dance, new styles of Chinese national folk dance continuously emerge over time. A key premise of both Chinese classical dance and Chinese national folk dance is that they are modern creations developed through the combination of research and innovation. They are not, nor do their practitioners typically claim them to be, strictly preserved or reconstructed historical or folk forms.

The research that goes into creating Chinese dance encompasses a wide range of performance practices, which may be documented in historical materials or embodied by living communities. The artistic researchers who create Dunhuang-style Chinese classical dance, for example, find inspiration in depictions of dancing humans and deities found at Dunhuang, a Buddhist heritage site in today's Gansu Province that was constructed during the first millennium CE. The artistic researchers who create Han-style national folk dances, by contrast, draw inspiration from popular entertainments and rituals performed in holiday processions and temple festivals among living communities. In many cases, Chinese dance practitioners will combine multiple sources when developing a new dance style. In the case of water sleeve, for example, dancers often study the performances of living *xiqu* actors, as well as historical sleeve dances documented in ancient and medieval artifacts such as jade pendants, stone relief carvings, tomb statues, historical paintings, and poetry. Engagement with contemporary *xiqu* performance is evident in Shao Weiqiu's water sleeve dances through the sleeve construction, the techniques used to manipulate the sleeve's movement, and the emphasis on breath and eye expression, all of which are employed in *xiqu* performance.² References to historical sleeve dance are apparent in the scale and shape of Shao's movement and lines, some of which resemble these early images.³

Through their emphasis on innovation, Chinese dance practitioners interpret their research to create new forms. The removal of singing or speech in Shao's sleeve dance choreography represents her obvious departure from xiqu, in which song and speech are usually considered essential to a complete performance. The rhythmical mapping of Shao's classroom choreography onto eight-count piano scores and the abstraction of movement sequences independent of narrative context also mark departures from typical xiqu music and stage action. A change from early and medieval sleeve dance is further apparent in the contexts of Shao's choreography. That is, her dances tend to take place in conservatory classrooms, proscenium stages, and film studios, while earlier dances are believed to have taken place in imperial palaces or at ritual sites that facilitated communication with gods and spirits. In her teaching and publications, Shao presents original theorizations of water sleeve movement aesthetics, often drawing on her studies in adjacent fields such as Chinese poetics, ink painting, medicine, and philosophy. Because of the original interpretation involved, Shao's teaching routines and pedagogical methods are considered her own intellectual and artistic creations. Through these contributions, Shao learns from existing forms while also introducing her own ideas and practices, illustrating the basic creative process for making Chinese dance.

Although it is generally less well known among Western dance audiences than China's ballet and modern dance repertoires, Chinese dance is the most widespread concert dance form in contemporary China and also has large transnational followings. According to a report published in 2016 by the Chinese National Academy of Arts in Beijing, Chinese dance represented more than half of all staged dance performances in China in 2015, including those presented by touring international ensembles.⁴ These results correspond to what I have observed in my ongoing field research across China during the past ten years, in which I have found Chinese dance to enjoy larger representation in academic teaching programs and performance ensembles, as well as greater financial resources and audiences than other concert dance forms. Dance teachers and choreographers in China create thousands of new classroom and stage repertoires for Chinese dance each year, and local governments and cultural organizations host annual competitions and festivals featuring these performances. Hundreds of degree-granting programs focused on Chinese dance are active across the country, and the genre is also the subject of a large and ever-expanding body of academic research. Chinese dance communities are active not only in China but also in Sinophone and diaspora communities abroad.⁵ Thus, while the focus of this book is on the historical development and contemporary practice of Chinese dance in the PRC, this topic covers just one part of a broader transnational phenomenon.

Beyond the concert dance sphere, Chinese dance is connected to a range of other social spaces and activities. Since the 1980s, adapted forms of Chinese dance have been incorporated into commercial performances marketed to tourists in theme parks and popular travel destinations.⁶ The amateur performance of Chinese

dance is common among schoolchildren and at corporate banquets, and it is also a core component of “square dancing” (*guangchang wu*), outdoor social dancing typically performed by middle-aged women in parks and other public spaces.⁷ Chinese dance also remains connected to the activities of folk practitioners and other ritual specialists in temple processions, weddings, funerals, exorcisms, and holiday festivals.⁸ Rather than attempt to cover all these arenas, I have limited my attention here to the concert field, focusing on the activities of artists based in professional conservatories and ensembles who create dance mainly for the proscenium stage.⁹ Through this choice, I aim to position Chinese dance in conversation with other recognized concert dance genres around the world, as well as to assert the relevance of dance in modern Chinese cultural studies alongside the more established fields of literature, cinema, drama, visual arts, and music.

This book is arranged chronologically and covers an eighty-year period, beginning in the 1930s and ending in the 2010s. The project is primarily historical: it traces, through a close examination of primary documents, the emergence and transformation of Chinese dance in China during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By weaving together stories about individual dancers, choreographic repertoires, intellectual debates, and institutions, the book also brings an ethnographic sensibility to this historical account. It narrates the development of Chinese dance as a complex cultural phenomenon that transcends simplistic dichotomies between personal and collective, hegemonic and resistive, traditional and contemporary, or embodied and conceptual. Structurally, the book emphasizes process as much as product, to highlight the prolonged labor on- and offstage that sustains dance creation. As such, each chapter traces a period of research and creation that led to an important new development. Chapter 1 follows the wartime dance work that resulted in the dance program presented at the first All-China Literature and Arts Worker Representative Congress in 1949. Chapter 2 builds to the launching of a national dance curriculum and the founding of the Beijing Dance School in 1954. Chapter 3 traces the circulation of Chinese dance on the world stage and the emergence of socialist national dance dramas by the late 1950s and early 1960s. Chapter 4 examines the relationship between Chinese dance and ballet that laid the groundwork for the Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966. Chapter 5 reveals how socialist-era activities formed the foundation for new Chinese dance creation in the post-Mao era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, chapter 6 presents the accumulation of artistic labor recounted in the book as a whole by treating Chinese dance activities of the twenty-first century as a continuation of trends established over the previous six decades.

Through these historical narratives, a variety of arguments emerge in the course of the book. In chapters 1 and 2, for example, I contend that wartime dance activities carried out in Nationalist-dominated and Japanese-occupied areas and by diverse groups that included individuals of diasporic, non-Han, non-Chinese-speaking,

and non-Chinese backgrounds contributed significantly to the early formulation and establishment of Chinese dance. This account complicates the existing assumption that China's early revolutionary socialist culture—of which I argue Chinese dance was an important component—was a product mainly of Chinese Communist Party–led agendas advanced in Yan'an primarily by local-born, Han Chinese individuals. In chapters 3 and 4, I demonstrate that Chinese dance served as the predominant national dance genre of the PRC during the 1950s and early 1960s, where it was part of a broad range of dance styles supported and promoted by the socialist state. While Chinese dance lost its leading status after the Cultural Revolution was launched in 1966 and ushered in a decade dominated by revolutionary ballet, I suggest that the rise of ballet too can be seen as, in part, a product of socialist investment in artistic experimentation and aesthetic pluralism during previous decades. This argument challenges the widespread views that socialist culture was monolithic and that ballet was the main form of China's revolutionary dance creation. In chapters 5 and 6, I argue that Chinese dance in the post-Mao era continues many legacies of the revolutionary wartime and early socialist periods. Although Chinese dance has changed over time, this book dates its emergence to the 1940s and 1950s—the decades of socialist revolution and socialist nation building, respectively—and it argues that the developments of this period have continued to inform dance vocabularies, choreographic methods, theoretical articulations, and institutional structures of Chinese dance since the late 1970s.

Although the book is organized chronologically and traces the historical emergence and transformation of a single genre over time, it does not present this trajectory as a teleological process or Chinese dance as an isolated genre. I do not believe that the Chinese dance of today is, by definition, artistically or ideologically “better” than the Chinese dance of earlier eras. Thus, this book does not support the common assumption that post-1970s economic liberalization produced more artistic innovation than was present in the early socialist decades. Like most art forms born out of revolution, Chinese dance has become less politically challenging over time, and the changing political meanings and uses of Chinese dance, as well as its continuously reinterpreted aesthetic forms, are a core consideration of this account. While Chinese dance today is a socialist legacy, it does not inherit all aspects of this legacy equally. In terms of the nonisolatedness of Chinese dance, I argue that Chinese dance has always been in deep conversations with adjacent dance forms. This book examines, to varying degrees, relationships between Chinese dance and a variety of other dance genres practiced in China during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Beyond dance, it also explores links to other artistic spheres, such as theater, music, visual art, and cinema. The close relationship between Chinese dance and *xiqu* is a recurring theme throughout the book, while cinema also plays an implicit role because the best extant documentation of Chinese dance is in the form of motion picture recordings.

Although Chinese dance has changed significantly over the decades, I suggest that three core commitments have defined the genre throughout its history, giving it continuity amid persistent innovation and redefinition. I call these commitments “kinesthetic nationalism,” “ethnic and spatial inclusiveness,” and “dynamic inheritance.” Beyond guiding the artistic work of dance practitioners, these commitments provide the theoretical and choreographic links that connect Chinese dance of the twenty-first century to its predecessors in earlier eras. These commitments both define Chinese dance as an artistic genre and mark it as a socialist legacy, and they are ultimately what give the genre its revolutionary potential at different times. Since these concepts are important themes throughout the book, it is helpful to briefly introduce them here.

Kinesthetic nationalism is the idea that what distinguishes Chinese dance as a genre is its aesthetic form, not its thematic content or where or by whom it is performed. According to kinesthetic nationalism, what makes Chinese dance “Chinese” is that its movement forms—its movement vocabularies, techniques, and rhythms, for example—are developed through ongoing research and adaptation of performance practices of Chinese cultural communities, broadly defined. In Chinese dance discourse, this idea is most often expressed through the concept of “national form” (*minzu xingshi*), a term promoted by Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong beginning in the late 1930s that continues to inform the theory and practice of Chinese dance today. When the idea was introduced, “national form” referred to new or yet to be created literary and artistic forms that would express contemporary life and bring about positive social change by being both resolutely modern and rooted in local culture. Thus, kinesthetic nationalism is focused on issues of artistic form and is premised on the idea that the local and the contemporary are mutually reinforcing.

Ethnic and spatial inclusiveness is the idea that Chinese dance should include styles and artists from all ethnic communities and geographic regions across China. As in many places, differences of ethnicity and geography in China often map onto disparities in historical privilege and power. Ethnic and spatial inclusivity, considered radical when it was introduced, proposes that China’s national dance forms should not be an expression only of dominant cultural groups—such as the Han ethnicity or the affluent coastal cities—but instead should incorporate the cultures of ethnically and geographically marginalized communities, such as non-Han groups, rural places, and inland regions. While there is no single term like “national form” that expresses this idea in Chinese dance discourse, ethnic and spatial inclusiveness builds on the concepts of the “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*) and “remolding” (*gaizao*), both of which were important in Chinese socialist culture from the 1940s onward. The concept of the “Chinese nation” theorizes Chinese identity as a historical accumulation of diverse cultures and groups. “Remolding” describes the retuning of artists’ sensibilities to shed prejudices, especially those against poor and rural communities.

Dynamic inheritance is a theory of cultural transformation that compels Chinese dance artists to research existing performance forms while also generating original interpretations of these forms. It is guided by the premise that cultural traditions inherently change and that they thus require continual innovation to maintain relevance to the contemporary world. In a basic sense, dynamic inheritance refers to the idea that cultural inheritance and individual innovation are mutually reinforcing processes. In Chinese dance discourse, a common phrase used to describe dynamic inheritance is “inherit and develop” (*jicheng yu fazhan*). Apart from being an abstract way of defining the artist’s goal in a theoretical sense, it also implies a specific set of creative methods.¹⁰ Thus, in both theory and practice, dynamic inheritance is what allows Chinese dance practitioners to take cultural continuity in new directions.

Early in the twentieth century, several prominent artists experimented with new dance choreography that could be considered precursors to Chinese dance. One was Yu Rongling (ca. 1888–1973), the Eurasian daughter of a Qing diplomat who studied dance in Tokyo and Paris between 1895 and 1903 and lived at the court of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) during its final years.¹¹ In 1904 Yu created three “Chinese dances” and performed at least one of them, *Ruyi Dance*, along with dances in “Spanish” and “Greek” styles, for the Qing empress dowager Cixi at the imperial Summer Palace in Beijing.¹² Another key figure in this preliminary period of experimentation was Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), a male Peking opera star who specialized in female roles and became one of China’s most famous celebrities. Between 1915 and 1925, Mei worked with drama theorist and playwright Qi Rushan (1875–1962) to develop a series of new plays that featured long dance sequences.¹³ These works not only transformed Peking opera performance conventions but also made dance a more central component of Chinese drama, as well as an emerging symbol of national identity.¹⁴

Yu Rongling and Mei Lanfang both established important precedents for subsequent Chinese dance developments. One, for example, was their use of existing materials as a foundation for new creation. In Yu’s case, her dances were inspired by Yu’s study of paintings held in the Qing art collections, as well as her discussions with court musicians.¹⁵ Similarly, Mei and his collaborator Qi took inspiration from Chinese literature and folklore, Buddhist paintings, and visual art from the Tang dynasty (618–907) to create the costumes and movements for Mei’s opera dances.¹⁶ Also, like later practitioners of Chinese dance, Yu and Mei both emphasized individual creativity and saw their work as being similar to modernist dance experiments that were taking place at the same time in other parts of the world.¹⁷

Although they set important precedents, however, Yu’s and Mei’s approaches each lacked key components of the core commitments of Chinese dance. First, neither explicitly theorized movement form as the central defining feature of what made

their dances Chinese. While little is known about Yu's choreographic theory, existing photographs and descriptions of her early Chinese dances do not suggest necessarily a preoccupation with movement form as their defining feature. Mei's collaborator Qi Rushan did leave extensive documentation of his theorization of what made Mei's performances "Chinese," and in these he emphasized modes of theatrical representation (aestheticism over realism), not movement form per se, as the central issue.¹⁸ Second, neither Yu nor Mei explicitly engaged the issue of ethnic and geographic inclusivity in their work. While Yu's *Ruyi Dance* employed a Manchu hairstyle and costuming, this should be interpreted in the historical context as a reflection of the dominant Qing Manchu court culture, rather than an attempt to reflect China's ethnic or geographical diversity. Similarly, while Mei's dances drew characters and plots from Chinese popular stories, the images he depicted on stage were refined figures associated with elite Han culture. The fact that Yu and Mei performed almost exclusively in the coastal urban centers of Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai also differentiated them from later Chinese dance practitioners, who hailed from and worked in a much broader range of locations across China.

One reason I date the emergence of Chinese dance to the 1940s is that this was the first time a group of dancers and choreographers set forth repertoires of dance choreography and accompanying theoretical writings that formulated Chinese dance in accordance with the core commitments of kineshetic nationalism, ethnic and spatial inclusiveness, and dynamic inheritance. There were many individuals involved in this movement. In chapters 1 and 2, I introduce five of the earliest and most influential, who remain key protagonists throughout the remainder of the book. They are Dai Ailian (a.k.a. Eileen Isaac and Tai Ai-lien, 1916–2006), Wu Xiaobang (a.k.a. Wu Zupei, 1906–1995), Qemberxanim (a.k.a. Kangba'erhan, Qambarkhan, and Kemberhan Emet, ca. 1914–1994),¹⁹ Liang Lun (a.k.a. Liu Hanxing and Liu Hanlun, b. 1921), and Choe Seung-hui (a.k.a. Choi Seunghee, Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi, and Sai Shōki, 1911–1969). Like Yu Rongling and Mei Lanfang before them, all of these dancers had significant international experiences that informed their contributions to Chinese dance. Dai was born and raised in Trinidad and launched her career in London; Qemberxanim was born in Kashgar and launched her career in Tashkent and Moscow; and Choe was born in Seoul and launched her career in Tokyo. Wu, after growing up in China, studied dance in Japan, and Liang, after growing up and beginning his dance career in China, later toured in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. These dancers' biographies converged in China during the 1940s and 1950s, and, with the exception of Choe, they worked in China for the remainder of their lives. I consider all five to be founding figures of Chinese dance in different ways.

Trinidad-born Dai Ailian receives special attention in this book because she was the first to articulate what would become the three core commitments



FIGURE 1. Dai Ailian in “Jiarong Drinking Party.” Published in *Yiwen huabao* 2, no. 5 (1947): 5. Photographer unknown. Reproduction provided by the Chinese Periodical Full-text Database (1911–1949), Quan Guo Bao Kan Suo Yin (CNBKSY), Shanghai Library.

of Chinese dance in her writings and performances (figure 1). As discussed in chapter 1, Dai formulated these ideas and choreographies during the 1940s, shortly after she emigrated to China. Her work achieved national influence in 1946 through the *Frontier Music and Dance Plenary* (*Bianjiang yinyue wudao dahui*), a gala-style event that premiered in Chongqing, the wartime Nationalist capital. A key document in Dai’s early theorization of Chinese dance was the published lecture, “The First Step in Developing Chinese Dance” (*Fazhan Zhongguo wudao di yi bu*), which was attributed to Dai and delivered at the

start of the *Plenary*. Circulated widely at the time in newspapers and magazines, this lecture remains one of the earliest theoretical texts on Chinese dance still extant today. In this lecture, Dai offers early formulations of kinesthetic nationalism, spatial and ethnic inclusiveness, and dynamic inheritance. Regarding kinesthetic nationalism, she writes:

Over the past three years, the Chinese Dance Art Society [which I led in Chongqing] worked hard to create [new dance works]. The narrative content was Chinese, and the performers were Chinese; yet, we cannot say that these were true Chinese dance dramas. We used foreign technique and footwork to tell the story—much like using a foreign language to tell a Chinese tale—and this was quite obvious to the audience. We can say that the work of the past three years took the first step in establishing dance as an independent art [in China]. But, as for creating “Chinese dance,” that was a mistaken direction. It was because of a lack of knowledge about Chinese dance customs that we followed this method. . . .²⁰

Dai goes on to explain what she envisions as the correct method for creating Chinese dance, outlining the principles of ethnic and spatial inclusiveness and dynamic inheritance. First, she describes a vast network of people conducting research on existing dance practices, including both Han and non-Han traditions from all areas of the country. Then, she describes them using what they find as the basis to create new dance forms. The *Plenary*, for which Dai’s lecture served as an introduction, also modeled this future project in its composition and execution. Absent from the program was all of Dai’s earlier choreography that had used either ballet or modern dance as its primary movement form. Instead, the *Plenary* comprised works derived from local performance practices. The works were by artists of diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds and represented what are today recognized as six nationalities and three geographic regions of China. According to Dai, the dances were rooted in local performance forms but reflected new artistic arrangements and ideas. The goal of the project, as Dai described it, was “to establish for the stage a new Chinese modern dance.”²¹

Another influential member of this early cohort was Choe Seung-hui, a Korean woman who became the first dancer from East Asia to tour on four continents and gain worldwide fame during the late 1930s (figure 2). As discussed in chapter 2, Choe led the early construction of xiqu-based Chinese classical dance and, together with Qemberxanim and others, established influential precedents for Chinese dance training. In 1945 a journalist in Shanghai recorded a statement by Choe that also foreshadows the core commitments of Chinese dance, especially the idea of dynamic inheritance. Choe was reportedly having a conversation with Mei Lanfang when Mei asked Choe to clarify the role of tradition in her own dance choreography. In response, Choe states, “I do not completely follow inherited dances that previous people have passed down. Some say new creation is



FIGURE 2. Choe Seung-hui in "Hourglass Drum Dance."
 Photographer: Studio Iris, Paris. Reproduced with permission from the
 private collection of Siqintariha.

destructive to tradition. I rather believe that new creation has always been the normal development of tradition. In the past, our ancestors' artistic creations were passed down and became today's art traditions. The new creations of today's artists will also become the traditions of future generations."²²

Here, Choe expresses a refreshingly open-ended and self-reflexive notion of dance creation, its relationship to tradition, and her own role in the production and reproduction of dance culture. This thoughtful intellectual agenda motivated the work she and others did to create Chinese dance, as they went on to invent new

choreographic repertoires, perform countless shows around China and the world, and inspire new generations of dancers in their roles as artists, theorists, teachers, administrators, and cultural icons. In this book, I examine the revolutionary bodies that emerged from these dancers' projects and formed the dominant danced expressions of China's socialist culture. In doing so, I seek to do justice to the complexity of their choreographies and the dynamism of their visions, showing how their boldness and imagination gave rise to the richness of China's dance history in the contemporary era.