2024

An Image that Resonates: Yang Liping and the Evolution of Contemporary Chinese Folk Dance

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10998855

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Abstract: Yang Liping 杨丽萍 (b. 1958) is China's most successful contemporary folk dance choreographer. Beyond being famous among dancers, she has achieved the status of a mainstream popular celebrity, balancing her reputation as a fine artist and cultural purist with success in the commercial arena. Drawing on nearly two decades of ethnographic and archival research in China, as well as analysis of Yang's dance performances, interviews, and visual media representations, this article asks how Yang achieved this unprecedented success through contemporary folk dance choreography. The paper examines Yang's rise to fame since the late 1970s through her transformation of an iconic Chinese folk image: the peacock dance. Peacock dance uses elements of a mythological story from Buddhist literature with a type of village dance performed in one particular ethnic group in China and adapts it into a multimedia national image that gets reproduced in film, visual art, and dance choreography. The paper shows how Yang has deftly adapted the peacock dance into her own signature brand through a series of multimedia platforms, while she maintains an emphasis on dance, a charismatic public persona, and a unique yet constantly adapting contemporary folk aesthetic as the core of her appeal.

Keywords: Chinese dance, contemporary folk dance, peacock dance, Yang Liping, Yunnan

Introduction: Folk Dance in China

The history of folk dance in contemporary China largely follows that in other parts of the socialist world. During the 1940s, when the country suffered chaos and violence during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, progressive artists and intellectuals adapted dances of rural communities and ethnic minorities into staged performances to promote communism and national unity. At the end of the Civil War in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, "national folk dance" (*minzu minjian wu* 民族民间舞) became a symbol of the country's democratic political ethos and commitment to establishing a new national culture grounded in the aesthetics of the common people (Wilcox 2016). From 1949 until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, folk dance companies from across the socialist world, including Kolo, toured China regularly. During this same period, Chinese dance companies also frequently performed their own newly adapted folk dance choreographies abroad. China sent regular delegations to the international folk dance competitions at the World Festivals of Youth and Students held in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. At these competitions, Chinese folk dance works were considered a highlight of the events and frequently won awards, indicating their importance in the international sphere of socialist folk dance culture (Wilcox 2018b).

Films made in China during the 1950s and early 1960s document the visual aesthetics and choreographic approaches employed in staged Chinese folk dances of this period. As shown in the 1959 film *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun* (*Bai feng chaoyang* 百凤朝阳) and the 1963 film *Colored Butterflies Fluttering About* (*Caidie fenfei* 彩蝶纷飞), most short-form folk dances of this period employ bright stage lighting and realistic sets in which dancers appear to perform in outdoor landscapes framed by trees, flowers, mountains, ponds, etc. Costumes are often colorful with eye-catching patterns and embroidery; they are designed to resemble clothing worn in the regions and ethnic groups referenced in the dances. In group choreography, dancers often wear identically matching dresses and perform in unison, enacting movements inspired by local performance practices. Stage blocking is highly coordinated, with dancers often maintaining equal distance from one another as they move in and out of rows, lines, circles, grids, and other geometric shapes. Both solo and group dances are found in these choreographies. While many group dances include men and women, some group dances and most solo dances feature women exclusively. Dancers often perform rhythmically complex footwork, bouncing actions and spins, emotive facial expressions, and arm and hand gestures that trace curving and circling pathways close to the upper body. Many dances feature props or musical instruments, and, in some cases, dancers also sing. References to everyday life are frequent in these works. For example, dancers perform motions adapted from agricultural labor such as tea-picking, pounding rice, gathering grapes, and milking cows. Some pieces also stage social interactions, such as courtship, marriage, and community events. Overall, these short dances have a festive and joyful atmosphere and a stable emotional range that focuses on projecting feelings of light-heartedness and cheer. In these works, folk dance embodies the diversity of ethnic and regional identities in China while using a unified choreographic approach and a consistent expressive tone. These dances aimed to present the Chinese Communist Party ideal of the "people" (*renmin*) in a way that was positive, diverse, and unified while also proudly rooted in local and regional cultures.

The widespread popularity of folk dance in China during the 1950s and early 1960s faced a sharp decline after the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when revolutionary ballets became the preferred choreographic form, a trend that lasted until the mid-1970s. In the late 1970s, folk dance experienced a nation-wide revival as China transitioned out of the Maoist period and into what became known as the Reform Era, a time of market transition and increased cultural engagement with the West officially launched in 1978. During this period, dancers were faced with the challenge of adapting staged folk dances created in the era of high socialism to a new context marked by new aesthetic tastes, desires, and rapidly changing social realities (Wilcox 2018b).

The most famous and successful Chinese folk dance artist to emerge out of this new period was Yang Liping 杨丽萍 (b. 1958), a woman from southwest China whose now more than fifty-year stage career has fundamentally transformed contemporary Chinese folk dance and its place in Chinese society. Yang is from Yunnan, China's most ethnically diverse province, which shares southern borders with modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. During the Tang and Song periods of medieval China, Yunnan was home to two independent kingdoms, the Nanzhao kingdom (649-903) and the Dali kingdom (937-1253), whose inhabitants are thought to be the ancestors of the modern-day Bai people, one of fifty-five officially recognized minority groups in the People's Republic of China (Bryson 2020). Yang is a member of the Bai ethnic group and was born in Dali, the ancient capital of the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms located in what is today northwest Yunnan. When she was around nine years old, Yang's family moved to Xishuangbanna in southern Yunnan. It was there that she began studying dance and became a professional dancer with the local Xishuangbanna Song and Dance Ensemble. Xishuangbanna is dominated by a different ethnic group, the Dai, and thus it was Dai folk dance that had the greatest impact on Yang's folk dance repertoire.

In this paper, I examine how Yang Liping's innovative interpretations of Chinese folk dance, especially the Dai peacock dance and other ethnic minority dances from her home province of Yunnan, have reenergized the folk dance scene in contemporary China since the late 1970s. Yang practices what I call "dynamic inheritance", a mode of choreographic innovation grounded in the combination of cultural research and individual artistic interpretation, which I have argued has been an accepted part of Chinese classical and folk dance choreography since these forms emerged as stage art in the 1940s (Wilcox 2018a). Yang's strategies of dynamic inheritance involve not only innovations in dance choreography itself but also in how the choreography is framed, including lighting and costume design, story and character elements, and how Yang presents herself and her creative process in the public sphere. I argue that Yang employs five major strategies to create a folk image that resonates consistently with contemporary audiences: 1) she employs recognizable folk dance forms in her choreography; 2) she connects these folk dance forms to stories and cultural themes with deeper meaning; 3) she builds on folk materials circulating in multiple media contexts; 4) she constantly updates her work while maintaining a personal aesthetic that is connected to folk material; 5) she herself is a compelling and charismatic figure whose public persona lends authority to her artistic work and, more broadly, to contemporary Chinese folk dance. Based on her enormous success in China and abroad, Yang's work offers a successful example of how folk dances from diverse parts of the globe can maintain their vitality in the twenty-first century.

Methods and Prior Research

As the most famous dancer in contemporary China and a mainstream media celebrity with one of the most commercially successful cultural enterprises in Chinese history, Yang has been the subject of extensive research published in the Chinese language. In English, the late Taiwanese dance scholar Ting-Ting Chang 張婷婷 (1974-2019) conducted the first major studies of Yang's work, first with her 2008 doctoral dissertation "Choreographing the Peacock: Gender, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Chinese Ethnic Dance," on the historical development of modern Dai peacock dance choreography, and later in her 2020 book chapter "Negotiating Chinese Identity through a Double-Minority Voice and the Female Dancing Body: Yang Liping's Spirit of the Peacock and Beyond," which focused specifically on Yang. Chang's research traced the development of the modern Dai peacock dance from non-narrative versions by male choreographers Jin Ming 金明 (b. 1926) and Mao Xiang 毛相 (1923–1986) in the 1950s and female dancer Dao Meilan 刀美兰 (b. 1944) in the 1970s and to Yang Liping's award-winning solo *Spirit of the Peacock* (*Que zhi ling* 雀之灵) in the mid-1980s and finally her first commercially successful large-scale production *Dynamic Yunnan* (*Yunnan yingxiang* 云南映象) in the early 2000s. Chang analyzes the hybrid aesthetics of Yang's peacock dance choreography, especially its incorporation of Western music, costuming, and movement elements, its negotiation of ethnic and national identities, and its feminist appropriation of the male peacock image in the context of changing gender norms in China during the Reform Era. Chang also examines the adoption of Yang's peacock dances as a symbol of Chinese identity among Chinese diaspora communities overseas and Yang's role as a charismatic female role model and entrepreneur who has brought significant resources to her home community in Yunnan through her artistic and cultural work.

In my 2018 book *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy,* I expand on Chang's work by tracing the evolution of Yang Liping's Dai peacock dance choreography through a second historical lineage, namely, the Dai epic of *Zhao Shutun* 召树屯, a story about a human who falls in love with a heavenly bird maiden, sometimes portrayed as a peacock, that dates at least to the seventeenth century and is told across China, India, and many parts of Southeast Asia. Drawing extensively on Chinese-language historical primary sources, I document early publications of the *Zhao Shutun* folk narrative in a variety of Chinese media during the mid-1950s, including a 1956 dance drama based on the story that was performed by the Xishuangbanna Nationality Cultural Work Team (*Xishuangbanna minzu gewutuan* 西双版纳民族歌舞团), the same ensemble that Yang later joined. Dance drama was expanded in the early 1960s and then suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, after which it was revived and expanded again in the late 1970s. Yang danced the lead role of the heavenly peacock maiden in the full-length version of this production when it was performed at a provincial-level festival in Yunnan in 1978, a national festival in Beijing in 1979, and then on an international tour to Hong Kong, Singapore, Burma, and Thailand in 1980-1981. This tour launched Yang to national and international stardom and led to her appointment to the position of soloist in the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble (*Zhongyang minzu gewutuan* 中央民族歌舞团), China's top national professional performance ensemble specializing in ethnic minority folk music and dance. Drawing on historical documentation of these different versions of the dance drama and a 1963 animation film adaptation that also featured dance, I show how Yang's later renditions of the peacock dance built on these earlier renditions of the *Zhao Shutun* legend, which provided much

of both the dance's visual imagery and its rootedness in folk culture. Thus, I argue that even as Yang made drastic changes to the dance choreography and its aesthetics in her later performances, the dance's grounding in folk tradition remained present because of its lasting connection to the Dai epic narrative (Wilcox 2018b, 164-175).

As a dance anthropologist, ethnographer, and historian and a scholar of Chinese studies, I speak, read, and write Mandarin Chinese fluently and have been conducting field and archival research in Chinese national folk dance communities for the past two decades. This includes studying technique, attending concerts, visiting schools and companies, conducting oral histories and interviews, engaging in participant observation, facilitating, and teaching workshops and performances, creating a library archive, and participating in academic exchange in both Chinese and English. Yang Liping has been an important figure in my research, because as the most visible practitioner of Chinese national folk dance both in China and internationally, she is a constant point of reference and source of inspiration both for myself and for many of the dancers I work with. I have seen Yang Liping's productions in China many times, including *Tibetan Riddle* (*Zang mi* 藏谜) in Beijing in 2008, *Echoes of Shangrila* (*Yunnan de xiangsheng* 云南的响声) in Beijing in 2009, *The Peacock* (Kongque 孔雀) in Daqing and Kunming in 2013, and *Dynamic Yunnan* (2013 revised version) in Kunming in 2013. In July 2013, during her national tour of *Peacock,* I met Yang Liping personally, attended a dinner with her, and observed a rehearsal of her company. In December of that year, I also took a delegation of students from the University of Michigan to attend the first Yang Liping International Dance Festival in Kunming. Yang's staff has been extremely responsive to my questions over the years and has given me numerous books, documentaries, and photographs they produce documenting Yang's work. In this essay, I draw on all of the above experiences to engage in a holistic reflection on Yang from the perspective of cultural creative strategy, with a focus on what her experience and success can teach folk dance practitioners in other contexts around the world.

Yang Liping's Creative Strategy

As discussed above, Yang Liping initially gained fame in China's dance scene during the folk dance revival in the late 1970s, when she starred in a dance drama adapted from the Dai *Zhao Shutun* folk legend in which she played the role of a celestial peacock. This work solidified Yang's close association with Dai peacock dance, one of the styles of regional folk dance that became established as part of the Chinese folk dance repertoire during the construction of national folk dance in the 1950s. We can see the importance of this dance style in the film *Hundred Phoenixes Face the Sun*, the first major film documenting Chinese national folk dance, in which Jin Ming's twelve-woman group dance *Peacock Dance* serves as the opening number, performed by the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, at the time China's top national professional folk dance ensemble. In fact, the practice of women's peacock dance was a new development introduced in the early 1950s by a male Dai dancer (prior to this, the peacock dance had traditionally been performed by men). However, by the time of Yang's debut, women's peacock dance was already firmly established as a recognized style of Dai folk dance. Dao Meilan, an influential female dancer of Dai ethnicity from Xishuangbanna who gained fame on the national stage in the 1960s, played an important role in lending authenticity to this newly established dance style. Thus, by the time of Yang's performances, women's peacock dance was regarded by Chinese audiences as a traditional folk form.

In addition to the peacock dance itself, the legend of *Zhao Shutun* and its circulation in a variety of different media prior to Yang's debut also lent cultural depth to the image of the peacock princess that Yang embodied in her dances. As mentioned above, the legend of *Zhao Shutun* dates back hundreds of years. A version of the tale is recorded in the *Pannasa Jataka* (*Fifty Jataka*), a collection of folk stories said to recount the lives of previous incarnations of the Buddha. The *Pannasa Jataka* was introduced to Southeast Asia from India, Burma (Myanmar), and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with the spread of Theravada Buddhism sometime after 500 CE, where it became the basis for extensive poetry, visual art, and performance throughout the region, including among the predominantly Theravada Buddhist Dai communities in southern Yunnan. According to Asian theater expert James Brandon, the story of Zhao Shutun (Prince Suthon) and the peacock princess, known as *Manora,* is "[p]erhaps the most widely dramatized of all *Jataka*… It is performed throughout Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and is also known in Indonesia" (Brandon 1967, 24). Summarizing the well-known story, Brandon writes:

> "Manora is the youngest of seven lovely daughters of the king of the *kinnara*, a mythical race of bird people. One day when she and her sisters are bathing in a mountain lake, a hunter sees them. Struck by Manora's beauty, he steals her wings and tail. The sisters fly away when they see the hunter, but Manora cannot, and the hunter takes her to the palace of his king. There she meets the crown prince and in due time they fall in love and marry. Soon the prince is sent off to war. A minister, who hates Manora, advises the king that she must be burned in order to save the king's life. She is ordered burned and, as the flames rise around her, she asks to have her wings and tail returned. Receiving them, she miraculously ascends from the flames into the heavens. The prince eventually returns from the wars and, finding Manora gone, sets out to look for her. He struggles against all manner of obstacles for seven years, seven months, and seven days, until he achieves what no mortal ever has: he reaches the Kinnara kingdom located on the summit of the Himalayas. Here he is reunited with Manora, and they live happily ever after" (Brandon 1967, 24).

Before Yang's debut in the peacock role, the peacock princess story had already circulated widely in different forms in Chinese popular culture during the 1950s and 1960s, including in oral recitation, published epic poetry, illustrated picture books, and even a 1963 feature film that used puppet animation to portray peacock dances (Wilcox 2018b). The peacock dance had thus accumulated layered meanings in Chinese folk culture—as a recognized folk dance form associated with the Dai culture, the region of Yunnan, and the early development of Chinese national folk dance in the socialist era; as a familiar story whose imagery, plot, characters, and themes audiences felt an emotional connection with and could readily interpret and understand; and a repository of religious and literary allusions that were shared with other folk cultures around the region.

Yang drew on this rich network of aesthetic associations and meanings when she launched her first individual peacock dance choreography in the mid-1980s. As Chang (Chang 2008; 2020) has pointed out, Yang's enormously successful solo dance *Spirit of the Peacock*, which debuted in 1986 and won first place awards for performance and choreography at the Second All-China Dance Competition that year, revised nearly every aspect of the Dai peacock dance as it had previously been performed. In Chang's view, the most notable departure from previous versions was Yang's incorporation of Western dance aesthetics, especially those reminiscent of European classical ballet.

Chang writes:

> "Although Yang used a tradition-inspired Dai musical composition in her first version, Yang adopted the song "Pastorale" by European group Secret Garden in her second version of *Spirit of the Peacock* in the 1990s. In this version, her dancing body drew comparisons to the classic Western ballet *The Dying Swan*. In the middle of the dance, Yang faces upstage, waving her arms with her legs in relevé, quickly traveling from stage left to stage right, resembling the internationally renowned Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) bourreéing en pointe in *The Dying Swan*. Yang's dancing body highlights extreme femininity through delicate movements, similar to the swan princess in the canonical ballet *Swan Lake*. Her dancing body presents how she, as a female choreographer, expresses her feelings through an exploration of the bird's movements. In contrast to the traditional Dai costume of a tight skirt with colors and patterns, Yang wears a wide white skirt with many layers, resembling the ballet tutu or even a Western wedding dress" (Chang 2020, 249).

As I demonstrate in my book *Revolutionary Bodies*, the white full-skirted dress had already been introduced to Dai peacock princess choreography much earlier, as we see in both the 1956 dance drama and the 1963 animation film versions (Wilcox 2018, 171-172). Where we see Yang depart most clearly from these earlier designs is in the upper part of the costume, which now employs a low-cut camisole-style bodice that exposes her upper chest, upper back, shoulders, and arms, in place of what had previously been fully covering long-sleeved jackets and capes (Zheng 1989).

Costume designers appear to have been experimenting with this more revealing look as early as 1957, when a published photograph of Jin Ming's group choreography *Peacock Dance* sent to represent China at the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow shows the female dancers wearing a partially see-through pale blue long-sleeved sheer top over a high-cut light colored camisole-style undergarment (Wu and Zheng 1957, 25). By replacing the previously opaque fabrics with this new sheer garment, the costume gives a suggestion of revealing the dancers' shoulders and arms without exposing them completely. Yang's version of the costume, by removing the sheer outer layer to reveal the dancer's upper body, creates a visual look that is indeed similar to the bodices used in many women's classical ballet costumes. At the same time, because the bottom portion of the dress remains full to the floor, it hides the dancer's legs completely, making it quite distinct from typical ballet clothing designed to expose and highlight the dancer's leg actions. This style of costuming, which combines a tight and revealing top with a full floor-length skirt, has remained consistent throughout the many permutations of Yang's peacock dance choreography over the past three and a half decades. Her full-length dance drama *The Peacock*, premiered in 2012, features several newly designed versions of the costume, now employing a skin-tight sheer bodysuit embossed with pale pink, silver, turquois, or white iridescent feather-like material over the breasts while allowing Yang's entire back and parts of her ribcage and abdomen to appear nude. Her lower body remains engulfed in either layers of full floor-length skirts or in one case a giant fluffy peacock tail that tufts out like a Victorian bustle and trails along the floor.

Yang's newly devised costume makes possible not only an alluring image of her exposed feminine upper body, but also a visual focus on her arms, back and shoulders, which become the main site of innovation in her revised peacock choreography. Discussing this shift, Chang writes:

"Yang's dance movements combined naturalistic imitations of bird-like actions with a focus on isolated uses of the torso and limbs that especially highlighted muscular dexterity. In Yang's hand gestures, her fingers expand out with long decorative nails, mimicking a clear outline of the bird's head. The way she moves her torso corresponds to the energy that flows inside her body, and when her movements reach out, it is as if that energy is flowing out through her limbs. Yang's peacock dance is different from the traditional Dai dance, because while she keeps many traditional Dai movement elements, she no longer emphasizes the down-and-up rhythm within her body. Unlike traditional Dai music, which has a consistent rhythm, the music in the second section of Yang's version is soft and mellow, and she dances to the melody rather than to a consistent beat. This is a revelation and a departure from Dai dance, and it gives her freedom to explore new movement possibilities. At the beginning, her arm movements appear segmented with visible curves or angles, but as she picks up speed, her arm movements become so smooth that it looks as if her arms are boneless" (Chang 2020, 248).

One of the most striking aspects of Yang's reinterpretation of the Dai peacock choreography, which also remains constant throughout her many re-imaginings of the dance over time, is her introduction of arm isolations as a key movement element. Earlier examples of Dai peacock dance feature bent arm lines, undulations of the wrists up and down, and circling and stretching of the arms to create long lines line the neck of a bird (Jin 1959). Yang innovates on these features by adding a style that combines imitation of naturalistic bird movements with the introduction of the "arm wave," an isolation technique developed by practitioners of popping and locking, a form of hip-hop dance developed on the West Coast of the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Johnson 2023). In *Spirit of the Peacock*, Yang performs a variation of the arm wave in several different positions: seated with her back to the audience, standing on one leg, leaning forward, standing facing the back of the stage, etc. (Yang 2007). Yang's rendition of this movement is different from the more standard version because instead of transferring energy in a line from one fingertip to the other and back, she instead transfers energy back and forth from fingertip to torso on both sides of the body at the same time. Instead of a pulse from one side of the body to another, Yang's version instead creates a symmetrical movement that implies a bird's wings rippling and extending outward. Popping and locking and other forms of early hip hop dance from the United States were just being taken up in major cities in China during the mid-1980s when Yang first introduced *Spirit of the Peacock* (Wilcox 2022). This popular dance movement, known as *piliwu* 霹雳舞, may have been one source of inspiration for Yang's new arm isolation technique, which gave her choreography a feeling of freshness and contemporaneity while still remaining true to the Dai tradition of the peacock dance theme. As with the other sources of inspiration that she drew on for this dance, Yang did not adopt the arm wave movement technique wholesale but rather developed her own interpretation that fundamentally transformed it and invested it with new meanings and aesthetic qualities.

What is significant about Yang's creative approach is that she maintains the vitality of a folk form—in this case Dai peacock dance—through a constant process of updating and revision that keeps her work fresh and appealing to contemporary audiences while still remaining rooted in folk material. The visual aesthetic of Yang's work is central to her success—her costume designs not only reflect current fashion trends in each period but actually drive new trends and styles, positioning her as a standard of excellence for taste-making in and beyond the dance world. The core features of Yang's innovations in Dai peacock dance costuming and choreography have remained constant since her

debut of *Spirit of the Peacock* in 1986—the basic costume design and the newly introduced movement elements are still present decades later in her 2012 dance drama *The Peacock*. This continuity has allowed Yang's individual style of peacock dance to become identifiable as a new folk tradition in itself, one that has allowed a folk form that otherwise would likely have gone out of fashion to remain extraordinarily popular. An important aspect of this popularity also has to do with Yang's public persona and her overall approach to artistic practice and cultural stewardship. This has paradoxically allowed her to balance enormous commercial success and a reputation for artistic individuality with a firm reputation as a champion of traditional folk culture.

Yang Liping as a Champion of Folk Tradition

Apart from her intensely popular peacock dance choreography, Yang is known for her advocacy of folk performers and folk culture, as well as her commitment to promoting what she calls "original ecology" (*yuan shengtai* 原生态) folk performance, which is considered by many to be more authentic than the professionalized folk music and dances created by conservatory-trained stage performers. Yang's first large-scale production, *Dynamic Yunnan*, was a product of field research Yang personally conducted in remote ethnic minority communities across her home province of Yunnan, and it represented somewhat of a revolution within China's folk dance field in both its creative approach and its popularity among audiences of all kinds (Mu 2015). Recounting this now well-known story, Li Dingding writes:

> "In 2000, Yang Liping to many people's disappointment left the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble to travel around Yunnan conducting fieldwork. While doing fieldwork, Yang Liping observed the following: many people in minority communities no longer wore ethnic costumes and instead were dressing in blue jeans; the sacred drums for welcoming spring could only be played by a few elders, and even her own mother no longer wore ethnic clothing. 'The only thing I could do was go into action… using the method of stage performance to record these precious folk songs and dances.' In the absence of sufficient external investment, Yang Liping invested all of her own money and served as the executive choreographer and artistic director, selected farmers born and raised in the villages to serve as performers and created this original ecology music and dance filled with humanity, ethnic character, and humanistic spirit. This large-scale original ecology song and dance collection, which took eighteen months to choreograph, incorporated original ethnic life forms from Yi, Wa, Tibetan, Hani, Dai, Naxi, and Bai ethnic groups, used 68 drums, 120 ethic masks, around 600 lights, and around 600 sets of handmade costumes, was named *Dynamic Yunnan*… As Yang Liping's most representative work, from its premier on August 8, 2003, to June 30, 2014, *Dynamic Yunnan* was performed 3,926 times in China and toured 248 shows in more than ten countries, including the USA, Brazil, Argentina, Japan, Australia, etc., creating 'box office miracles' in many performance markets… Today, *Dynamic Yunnan* is mainly performed as a fixed show at the Yunnan Art Theater, where it is staged 300 times each year with an audience of up to 960 at each show, with a total viewership of more than 100,000 each year" (Li 2015, 56-58).

Dynamic Yunnan set a new standard for folk performance in China insofar as it rejected conservatory-trained musicians and dancers in favor of artists recruited from the countryside who were born and raised in the communities the performance forms repre-

sented. Additionally, Yang's use of handmade costumes and diverse aspects of material culture such as drums and masks that were based directly on items discovered in her field research gave the production a stunning visual aesthetic that departed from that found in other Chinese folk dance productions of the time. Moreover, Yang incorporated her own peacock dance choreography into the show, and this further contextualized her, and her work as rooted within the broader cultural landscape of Yunnan folk arts. As an ethnic minority dancer who herself was born and raised in Yunnan, Yang's personal identity lent credibility to the project as a whole and further reasserted her status as an authoritative voice and legitimate interpreter of the diverse cultures of the region.

Throughout my ongoing field research with professional dancers in China, which has coincided with the two decades since the success of *Dynamic Yunnan*, I have repeatedly heard artists from all backgrounds name Yang Liping as a role model. Practitioners of modern and contemporary dance often cite Yang's independent spirit and her commitment to pure artistic expression as a source of inspiration for their own work. Meanwhile, practitioners of Chinese folk and ethnic dance point to Yang as successful proof that a market for folk dance exists in China and around the world as long as artists connect their work with authentic folk traditions. Yang's personal fashion style, in which she always appears in media interviews, television appearances, photo shoots, etc. dressed in her own creative renditions of ethnic-inspired clothing and accessories, further contributes to her status as a cultural icon. Yang's commitment to her art is legendary and is also a part of her public appeal. Her persistence performing on stage into her mid-sixties has prompted countless personal interest pieces and interviews delving into her eating habits, beauty and fitness regime, rehearsal strategies, decision to not have children, and other subjects, in addition to her strong and often critical professional views related to dance training, choreography, the protection of folk art, and etc. As a result of this complex interweaving of Yang's personal and professional lives in her public persona, Yang has remained at the forefront of Chinese folk dance discourse and artistic practice, and her work continues to inspire new generations of artists both in and beyond China who aspire to make their own meaningful contribution to the reimagination and promotion of folk arts.

Photos:

Image 1- Yang Liping in Spirit of the Peacock, 1997, Photographer Ye Jin

Image 2- Yang Liping in The Peacock, 2012, Photo courtesy Yunnan Yang Liping Arts & Culture Co., Ltd.

Image 3- Yang Liping in The Peacock, 2012, Photo courtesy Yunnan Yang Liping Arts & Culture Co., Ltd.

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Слика која одјекује: Јанī Лиūинī и еволуција савременоī кинескоī народноī ūлеса

Сажетак: Јанг Липинг 杨丽萍 (p. 1958) је најуспешнија кинеска кореографкиња савременог традиционалног плеса у Кини. Осим што је позната међу плесачима, она је постигла статус мејнстрим популарне и познате личности, балансирајући своју репутацију ликовне уметнице и културног чистунца са успехом у комерцијалној арени. Ослањајући се на скоро две деценије етнографских и архивских истраживања у Кини, као и на анализу Јангових плесних представа, интервјуа и визуелних медијских репрезентација, овај чланак поставља питање: како је Јанг постигла овај невиђени успех кроз савремену кореографију традициналног плеса? Рад истражује Јангов успон до славе од касних 1970-их кроз њену трансформацију култне кинеске народне иконе: плес пауна. Паунов плес користи елементе митолошке приче из будистичке књижевности са врстом сеоског плеса који се изводи у једној одређеној етничкој групи у Кини и прилагођава га у мултимедијалну националну слику која се репродукује у филму, визуелној уметности и плесној кореографији. У раду је приказано како је Јанг вешто прилагодила плес пауна у свој препознатљив бренд кроз низ мултимедијалних платформи, док она задржава нагласак на плесу, харизматичној публици и јединственој, али стално адаптирајућој савременој фолк естетици као сржи своје јединствености.

Кључне речи: кинески плес, савремена народна игра, плес пауна, Yang Liping, Yunnan