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## When Folk Dance Was Radical: Cold War Yangge, World Youth Festivals, and Overseas Chinese Leftist Culture in the 1950s and 1960s

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# When Folk Dance Was Radical: Cold War *Yangge*, World Youth Festivals, and Overseas Chinese Leftist Culture in the 1950s and 1960s

EMILY WILCOX

**ABSTRACT:** This article challenges three common assumptions about Chinese socialist-era dance culture: first, that Mao-era dance rarely circulated internationally and was disconnected from international dance trends; second, that the *yangge* movement lost momentum in the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC); and, third, that the political significance of socialist dance lies in content rather than form. This essay looks at the transformation of wartime *yangge* into PRC folk dance during the 1950s and 1960s and traces the international circulation of these new dance styles in two contexts: the World Festivals of Youth and Students in Eastern Europe, and the schools, unions, and clan associations of overseas Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and San Francisco. By tracing the emergence and circulation of *yangge* and PRC folk dance, I propose the existence of "Cold War *yangge*" – a transnational phenomenon in which Chinese folk dance became a site of leftist political activism.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese folk dance, World Festivals of Youth and Students (World Youth Festivals), global Cold War, Overseas Chinese, Sinophone socialism, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, anti-communism, Eastern Europe, PRC history.

## Introduction

The idea that China was culturally insular and "closed off from the world" between the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the launch of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s is a common misconception that has been widely challenged in recent scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Not only did China engage in frequent cultural exchange with other socialist bloc countries during this period, there was also significant cultural traffic between China and many parts of the capitalist and non-aligned world, especially in places with large Chinese diasporic communities and active struggles against colonial regimes. On both sides of the Cold War, culture served as a potent medium for political and ideological mobilisation, often with the express purpose of building alliances across borders. China was an active participant in this process, and this led to the rapid transnational circulation of Chinese leftist culture.

Prior to the founding of the PRC, one of the most important mediums for the spread of Chinese leftist culture domestically was *yangge* (秧歌, also known as *yangko*), a type of Han folk song and dance from rural north China that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adapted into political performance starting in the late 1930s.<sup>2</sup> Initiated at the CCP base area in Yan'an and expanding throughout the country by the late 1940s, this new form of *yangge* became one of the most recognised symbols of Chinese socialist culture and a powerful tool of education and political

recruitment, even constituting a major factor in the CCP victory over the Kuomintang (KMT) in the Chinese Civil War (Holm 1984; Holm 1991; DeMare 2015). Until recently, it was widely believed that the *yangge* movement dissipated in the years following the CCP's move out of rural areas and back to the cities after 1949. In a study of *yangge* in Beijing in the early 1950s, for example, Chang-tai Hung argues that after an initial attempt to promote *yangge* in the early PRC, the movement went on the decline due to lack of interest from urban audiences. Hung writes, "After 1951 no major *yangge* musicals were staged, and writings about it declined drastically (...) the dance seemed to have lost its appeal" (Hung 2005: 95).

In this article, I reassess the post-1949 history of *yangge*, arguing that this performance form not only did not decline following the establishment of the PRC, but rather enjoyed a new resurgence as a vehicle for the promotion of China's leftist culture in new forms both at home and abroad. Here, I use the term "leftist culture" to describe activities that aligned politically and ideologically with the socialist bloc during the Cold War. During the 1950s and early 1960s, a new repertoire emerged of what I call "Cold War *yangge*" – staged dance choreographies

1. For my own work on this subject, see Wilcox 2017; 2018a; 2018c; 2019a.

2. "Literally rice [planters'] [popular] song, the *yangge* is a traditional collective dance linked to the yearly agricultural cycle and accompanied by songs and various musical instruments" (Graezer 1999: 31).

adapted from rural Han performance that were used to promote the new culture of the PRC domestically and internationally. Cold War *yangge* was different from wartime *yangge* in that it drew upon a broader range of Han folk practices, including those from regions of southern China that had not been under CCP control before 1949. It also differs from wartime *yangge* in its greater emphasis on performance technique and professionalised stage aesthetics. Despite these differences, Cold War *yangge* maintains the basic formula of wartime *yangge* – it emerges from collaborations between Party intellectuals and folk artists and uses the aesthetics of rural performance modalities to promote the political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party.

In this essay, I look at three components of the development of Cold War *yangge* and its domestic and transnational circulation during the 1950s and early 1960s. First, I trace the development and domestic circulation of new Han folk dance choreography within the context of national music and dance festivals in post-1949 China. Second, I examine the promotion of this new choreography internationally through PRC performances at the World Festivals of Youth and Students in Eastern Europe, which PRC dancers attended regularly from 1949 to 1962. Third, I explore the exporting of Cold War *yangge* repertoires to Chinese diaspora communities in Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the United States, through music and dance films, print media, and live performances put on by local organisations such as Chinese schools and labour unions. Through this examination, I argue that *yangge* continued to be an important component of Sinophone leftist culture throughout the first two decades of the Cold War. That is, *yangge* was a vital component of a transnational network of socialist-aligned Sinitic language cultures that included but also extended beyond the boundaries of the PRC. Before the launch of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s, when Chinese ballet took over as a new national symbol, China waged its cultural Cold War not with ballerinas but with folk dancers.

### Yangge after 1949: National festivals and PRC folk dance

In the early years of the PRC, *yangge* performance largely followed its wartime models. In 1949 and 1950, for example, parades of *yangge* dancers marched into cities to celebrate the arrival of the CCP. At the same time, new large-scale *yangge* pageants such as the stage production *The Great Song and Dance of Long Live the People's Victory* and open-air show *The Great Yangge of Building the Motherland* incorporated *yangge* styles that had been popular in the CCP-occupied territories, such as northern Shaanxi waist drum (*yaogu* 腰鼓), walking flower lantern (*zou huadeng* 走花燈), Hebei war drum dance (*zhangu wu* 戰鼓舞), and Northeast *yangge* (*Dongbei da yangge* 東北大秧歌) (Hung 2005; Dong and Long 2008).

What occurred starting in 1951 was not a decline of *yangge* but rather its expansion to include a wider array of regional Han folk dance styles from different parts of the country, as well as its transition from a mass art form developed for rural spaces into a professionalised performance repertoire for the urban concert stage. This shift coincided with the establishment of new dance conservatories and professional performance ensembles under the leadership of the new PRC government that were tasked with creating dance styles to represent the culture of new China (Wilcox 2019a). In late 1950, Yan'an *yangge* veteran and Central Academy of Drama Dance Group leader Chen Jinqing made a public statement

announcing this new direction for *yangge* dance. She writes, "If we want to promote improvement [of *yangge*] and guide its popularisation, we must have fine works with strong artistry to push the movement forward" (Chen 1950: 20).<sup>3</sup>

To encourage dancers across the country to come forward with these new *yangge* choreographies, the Ministry of Culture established a multi-tiered festival system in which new works were shown at regional festivals, from which selections were presented at national festivals in Beijing. In the fall of 1950, one such national festival focused on ethnic minority song and dance from four regions (Wilcox 2016). Another national festival featuring both Han and ethnic minority dances from six regions was the Dance Study Festival (*Wudao guanmo huiyan* 舞蹈觀摩會演) in May 1951 (Fan 1951). Two subsequent national festivals, each featuring both ethnic minority and Han folk dance works, were the First and Second All-China Folk Music and Dance Festivals (*Quanguo minjian yinyue wudao huiyan* 全國民間音樂舞蹈會演), in April 1953 and March 1957 (Zhang 1953; *Renmin Yinyue* 1957). By introducing successive waves of new choreographies adapted from diverse regional folk material, these festivals ensured the continued innovation of *yangge* dance, and in this way the Yan'an *yangge* movement took on a new life as PRC Han folk dance.<sup>4</sup>

The new Han folk dance choreographies staged at these national festivals differed from earlier *yangge* performances in that they were no longer parades aimed at mass participation or theatrical works that combined speech and movement. Instead, they tended to be pure dance works that emphasised performance technique and were designed for viewing on the concert stage. A typical example of this new choreography was *Red Silk Dance* (*Hongchou wu* 紅綢舞), a favourite at the Dance Study Festival in 1951 that went on to become one of the most iconic Chinese dance choreographies of the socialist era (Figure 1). This dance, which blended elements of Northeast Great *Yangge* (*Dongbei da yangge* 東北大秧歌), Peking opera, and the popular comedy form *Errenzhuàn* 二人轉, featured men and women dressed in rural clothing performing a high-spirited dance with long red streamers. The dancers made elaborate patterns with the silk and moved in and out of intricate stage formations, demonstrating technical prowess while maintaining an earthy folk aesthetic.<sup>5</sup> At the time, PRC dance critics regarded this dance as a successful response to Chen Jinqing's call for new artistic *yangge* choreography. In his review of the 1951 festival, for example, Yan'an *yangge* veteran Hu Sha commended *Red Silk Dance* for transcending what he and others had done previously, which he describes as "a superficial understanding of [*yangge*...]" (Hu 1951: 6). Hu also added that after seeing works like *Red Silk Dance*, "We are convinced that before long we will have our China's new dance" (*ibid.*: 7). Chen, Hu, and others viewed these new choreographies as extensions of their earlier *yangge* creations into a new era. Meanwhile, these approaches also brought China in line with strategies for state-sponsored folk dance taking place across the socialist and postcolonial world during this period (Shay 2002).

3. All translations are my own.

4. Although both ethnic minority and Han dances were included in this new PRC folk dance repertoire, I focus here only on the Han component, because this is the one most directly connected to wartime *yangge*. PRC ethnic minority dance emerged out of a different wartime dance movement, known as *Bianjiang wudao* 邊疆舞蹈, or "Frontier Dance." For more on this pre-1949 history of ethnic minority dance, see Wilcox (2019a; 2019b). For more on the relationship between ethnic minority and Han folk dance in the PRC, see Wilcox (2016; 2018b; 2019a).

5. For a video of this dance, see <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.58.4> (accessed on 19 January 2020). This is a section of the longer film *Caidie fenfei* 彩蝶紛飛 (*Caidie fenfei*, *Colored butterflies fluttering about*. Beijing: Beijing film Studio, 1963).



Figure 1. Red Silk Dance in Moscow. Originally published in *China Pictorial (Renmin huabao)* 1952, No. 1. Used with permission from China Foto Bank.

Over time, the choreographies presented at national festivals greatly expanded the range of *yangge* dance forms present on China's stages. Another example of this new choreography was *Running Donkey (Pao lu 跑驢)*, one of the most popular works from the 1953 festival (Figure 2). *Running Donkey* employed comedic techniques from Hebei Earth *Yangge (Hebei di yangge 河北地秧歌)* to reinterpret a scene from Kun opera. Using a hobby horse prop common in rural *yangge* performance, it portrayed a young couple returning by donkey to the wife's home for the Chinese New Year with their new-born child. While *en route*, the donkey gets stuck in a mud pond and has to be pulled out, setting in motion a chain of hilarious events (Bai 1953). Like *Red Silk Dance*, *Running Donkey* featured complicated movements that highlighted the performers' skills, distinguishing it from earlier Yan'an *yangge* dances that used simple movements to encourage mass participation. Critics attributed the success of this piece to the "agile joints" and "high technique" of its performers, including their sophisticated acting, adept use of musical rhythms, and realistic manipulation of the hobby horse, which "looks just like riding a real donkey" (Hui 1953).



Figure 2. *Running Donkey*. Originally published in *China Pictorial (Renmin huabao)* 1953, No. 6. Used with permission from China Foto Bank.

By the end of the 1950s, this new Han folk dance-inspired choreography developed into one of the most prolific and influential dance styles in the PRC (Liu 2012; Xu 2014). Stretching beyond the traditional confines of *yangge* dance in northern China, these new repertoires, now grouped under the more expansive name of "Han folk dance" (*Hanzu minjian wu 漢族民間舞*), included adaptations of southern styles such as Fujian tea picking dances (*Caicha wu 採茶舞*) and Yunnan flower lantern (*Huadeng 花燈*), as well as

folk forms common across the country, such as lion dances (*Shiziwu 獅子舞*) and dragon dances (*Longwu 龍舞*). In the late 1950s, there was a popular saying known as "*san deng yi pao*" (三燈一跑, literally "three lanterns and one running"), which referred to the four most widely performed works from this style: *Lotus Dance*, *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*, *Flower Drum Lantern*, and *Running Donkey*. By 1957, these dances had become reportedly what "every song and dance ensemble across the country, regardless of size (including professional and amateur), performed" (Zhong 1957). As I will discuss in the next two sections, these new choreographies circulated quickly beyond China's borders as well, where they were embraced in Eastern Europe and the USSR as symbols of international socialism but suppressed in the Chinese diaspora as expressions of leftist political activism and anticolonial unrest.

### The world festivals of youth and students: Yangge goes to Europe

Around the same time that *yangge* moved into China's cities, it also began to circulate widely abroad. One of the most important venues for this international exposure was the World Festivals of Youth and Students (WFYS), also known as World Youth Festivals. Launched in Prague in 1947 WFYS were youth rallies organised around themes of world peace, anti-imperialism, and international friendship. At the height of their popularity in the mid-1950s, they took place biennially, with each festival attracting around thirty thousand participants from more than 100 countries (Koivunen 2012: 137). The World Federation of Democratic Youth hosted these festivals in conjunction with the International Union of Students, with the support of local political parties and youth organisations around the world. Although they welcomed participants of all political leanings, the WFYS promoted leftist values and were denounced in the West as communist propaganda events (Kotek 1996). The Soviet Union backed the early festivals, while the United States opposed them and discouraged participation (Krekola and Mikkonen 2011; Peacock 2012; Rutter 2014). In the context of the Cold War, the early WFYS was an important platform for cultural exchange among the global left (Koivunen 2012, 2014).

Chinese participation in WFYS began in 1947 and lasted until 1962, and delegations of Chinese dancers played a central role in China's international presence at these events. The 1947 Chinese delegation was small and did not include dancers (Li 1949). However, starting in 1949, China sent dancers to every WFYS: Budapest in 1949, East Berlin in 1951, Bucharest in 1953, Warsaw in 1955, Moscow in 1957, Vienna in 1959, and Helsinki in 1962 (Song 1994). For a variety of reasons, China did not participate in the remaining five Cold War-era festivals – Sofia in 1968, East Berlin in 1973, Havana in 1978, Moscow in 1985, and Pyongyang in 1989 (Li 2012: 128).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, its enthusiastic participation from 1949 to 1962 made the WFYS one of the most important sites for PRC artists to present their work internationally and gain exposure to foreign arts communities during this period. Regarding its impact on literature, Nicolai Volland calls the WFYS "a key event in the transnational cultural life of the socialist bloc" that gave young Chinese writers "occasion to meet their peers from other nations and develop an internationalist socialist identity" (Volland 2007: 56). Li Yansong, who writes about the impact of WFYS on Chinese music, similarly asserts

6. There were WFYS planned in Algiers in 1965 and Accra in 1966, but both were cancelled due to local political coups (Rutter 2013: 198). By the time of the next WFYS, held in Sofia in 1968, China was mired in the Cultural Revolution and did not attend (Song 1994: 89, 190; Rutter 2013: 199).

that China's participation in WFYS also had a "stimulating impact on the formation of new China's music system" (Li 2012: 131).

Wartime *yangge* styles adapted for the concert stage, together with the newly created Han folk dance choreographies, played a prominent role in China's WFYS presentations. A report announcing the departure of the first Chinese dance delegation to the 1949 WFYS in Hungary writes vividly that the group will "twist *yangge* (...) out beyond the nation's borders (*ba* [...] *yangge niu chu guo qu* 把[...]秧歌扭出國去) and make the waist drum ring out in Budapest and elsewhere, telling of China's celebrations of Liberation and new construction" (*Quanguo xuelian tongxun* 1949[1]). China won awards for two pieces presented at that year's WFYS dance competition: *Great Yangge* (*Da yangge* 大秧歌) and *Waist Drum Dance* (*Yaogu wu* 腰鼓舞). *Red Silk Dance* would go on to win at the next WFYS in 1951. In 1953 awards went to *Running Donkey*, as well as *Lotus Dance* (*Hehua wu* 荷花舞), a new work adapted from the Shaanxi *yangge* walking flower lantern, and *Lion Dance* (*Shi wu* 獅舞) and *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies* (*Caicha pudie* 採茶撲蝶), dances based on rural Han performance from Hebei and Fujian, respectively (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*. Originally published in *China Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*) 1953, No. 6. Used with permission from China Foto Bank.

Over the course of the seven festivals from 1949 to 1962, 40 choreographies from the PRC won awards at the WFYS dance competitions, of which 19 were adapted from rural Han folk performance. The number of awards peaked at the 1957 WFYS in Moscow, where the prize-winning Han folk dances included *Flower Drum Dance* (*Huagu wu* 花鼓舞), *Dragon Dance* (*Long wu* 龍舞), *Spring Arrives in Tea Mountain* (*Chun dao chashan* 春到茶山), *Flower Drum Lantern* (*Huagudeng* 花鼓燈), and *Shepard Flute* (*Mu di 牧笛*) (Song 1994; Mao 2005).

The positive reception China's new folk dance choreographies enjoyed at WFYS further encouraged commitment to this art form at home, generating a cycle of mutual reinforcement between the national festivals and the WFYS dance competitions. *Festival*, the official WFYS magazine, contains many enthusiastic reviews of Chinese dance choreography. One such article, describing audience reactions to a program including *Red Silk Dance* at the 1951 WFYS in Berlin, reports that "The Chinese cultural program is one of the most prestigious spectacles of the festival," and there were "exclamations when the [Chinese] group performed at Werner Seelenbinder-Halle," especially in reaction to "the popular traditions appearing magnificently in the dances, notably the ribbons of silk that start a deluge of applause."<sup>7</sup> Another review, published during the 1953 festival in Bucharest and referencing a program including *Lion Dance*, writes approvingly, "the leaders of the [Chinese] ensemble have taken much care in studying and bringing out the old tradition of Chinese folk art."<sup>8</sup> Chinese media outlets proudly publicised

these international achievements, printing photographs of China's award-winning dances along with news of their glowing reception (see *Renmin huabao* 1955[9],[10]; *Wudao* 1958[1]). China's dance leaders also regularly cited the WFYS successes as evidence that adapting folk dance was the right direction for China's dance field. For example, in her address to the Second National Meeting of Literature and Art Workers in September 1953, then China Dancers Association president Dai Ailian 戴愛蓮 (1954) enumerated each dance award China had received at WFYS since 1949, and she cited this as one of the dance field's most important accomplishments since the PRC's founding, which should be taken as a model going forward. A ten-year retrospective of China's international dance exchange published in 1959 in China's national dance journal *Wudao* likewise featured the WFYS awards prominently, including a chart of every award-winning work and quotations from foreign commentators about how much they loved these dances. The author writes, "Of course, this praise shows enthusiasm, friendship, and encouragement, and it pushes us to work even harder" (Sheng 1959).

The PRC was not unusual in using dance, especially folk dance, as a key component of its cultural programming at the WFYS. Starting from the first festival in Prague, newspaper reports about WFYS consistently mention dance performances as a key attraction of these gatherings (see *The North-China Daily News* 24 July 1947; Zhang 1947). Moreover, documents stored at the WFYS archives in Amsterdam show that countries from around the world – including both the socialist bloc and many nonaligned Asian, African, and Latin American nations – regularly participated in folk dance competitions and the cultural showcases these events hosted. As a photo caption in *Festival* notes during the 1955 meetings, "In the streets and on Warsaw Square, everywhere the youth are singing and dancing – or learning to dance – it's everywhere at the Festival."<sup>9</sup> Commenters hostile to the festivals often dismissed these performances as meaningless entertainment or, as one report glibly derides, "a lavish and costly jamboree designed to project the 'superiority of the Socialist system over capitalism'."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to critics who saw WFYS folk dance as inauthentic kitsch designed to mask the realities of socialist life, writings in *Festival* suggest that WFYS organisers invested significant meaning in these performances and regarded them as expressions of deeply held political values. As described in *Festival*, folk dance was a product of the working classes, making it central to the left-leaning ideals of the WFYS. A 1953 article about the Chinese delegation describes "the old tradition of Chinese folk art, created by hundreds of thousands of anonymous artists [that...] express[es] the thoughts and feelings of the people, its desire for peace and freedom."<sup>11</sup> WFYS organisers presented folk dance as a means to overcome cultural barriers, linking it with the WFYS themes of peace and friendship. A 1951 article announces, for example, "The various shows will aim at providing a cultural exchange as a powerful weapon for strengthening the unity of nations and to help mutual understanding in the fight for peace."<sup>12</sup> To encourage this mutual learning, the 1957 WFYS program calls for "Get-togethers to learn folk dances" and "Classes in folk dancing," in addition

7. "Un Merveilleux Programme Artistique Chinois" (A marvelous Chinese artistic program), *Festival*, 15 August 1951, n.p., in World Festival of Youth and Students Collection ARCH01667, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter, WFYSC), Binder 9, Folder 3.
8. "True Folk Art," *Festival*, 9 August 1953, n.p., in WFYSC, Binder 9, Folder 4.
9. *Festival*, 6 August 1955, n.p., in WFYSC, Binder marked "Fifth World Festival of Youth Warsaw 1955."
10. "Plans for the Sixth World Youth Festival, Moscow, July 28-August 11, 1957" B.382 September 1956, n.p., in WFYSC, Binder marked "6th Festival Moscow 1957."
11. "True Folk Art."
12. "Highlights from the Programme," *Festival*, 5 August 1951, n.p. in WFYSC, Binder 9, Folder 3.

to performances (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1957: 11-2). Furthermore, WFYS documents aligned folk dance with anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.<sup>13</sup> A 1951 article about performances by the Algerian delegation asserts, "The national programmes of Colonial youth will mostly be devoted to the heroic fight for national liberation."<sup>14</sup> Another 1955 article about the Indonesia delegation describes the need to revive "old popular culture (...) which has been long oppressed by colonialism."<sup>15</sup>

By aligning folk dance performances with these broader political and cultural values – honouring the cultural contributions of labouring people, achieving understanding across cultural barriers, and promoting anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism – the WFYS positioned folk dance choreographies as not simply forms of entertainment but also embodiments of political causes. In this way, China's Cold War *yangge* transcended the borders of the PRC and participated in an international network of performance practices in which folk dance stood for leftist culture.

### **Policing yangge: PRC folk dance in overseas Chinese communities**

In post-1949 China and at WFYS, promotion of wartime *yangge* styles and their new incarnation as PRC folk dance was largely uncontroversial, because the politics these performances stood for aligned closely with the ideological views ascendant in those communities. A different situation often unfolded when wartime *yangge* and PRC folk dance were promoted to overseas Chinese communities. In places such as the British colonies of Hong Kong, Malaya, and Singapore and Chinese diaspora communities in the United States, cultural exports from the PRC were often treated with hostility by local governments, leading these dances to become subversive. It is in these contexts that Cold War *yangge* emerged most clearly as a terrain of political contestation, because it was through participation in folk dance that local Chinese communities took sides and positioned themselves in relation to larger geopolitics.

Before the establishment of the PRC, China's newly emergent leftist wartime performance forms, including *yangge*, travelled to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia through the work of artists on tour from the mainland. In 1946-1948, the CCP-supported Central Plains Dramatic Arts Society (*Zhongyuan juyi she* 中原劇藝社) and the China Music, Dance, and Drama Society (*Zhongguo gewu juyi she* 中國歌舞劇藝社), abbreviated "Zhong Yi" (中藝), which developed its performance repertoires in China during the War of Resistance Against Japan, spent two years performing theatre, music, and dance for overseas Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaya, and Singapore (Wilcox 2019b). During their tour in Hong Kong in 1946, the Central Plains Dramatic Arts Society performed *Brother and Sister Open the Wasteland* (*Xiongmei kaihuang* 兄妹開荒), a canonical work of wartime *yangge* (*Zhongguo dianying* 1946[1]). During its tour in Singapore in 1947, Zhong Yi also performed the three-act new style opera *Child Heroes* (*Ernü yingxiong* 兒女英雄), along with other musical and dance works created during the war (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 7 September 1947). Confirming the *yangge* aesthetics of Zhong Yi's shows, an advertisement in the Singapore-based *Nanyang Siang Pau* wrote, "This evening's performance [by Zhong Yi] mainly includes Chinese folk song and dance and variety dramas, which are full of country flavour" (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 9 October 1947). During this same period, in 1946-47, the Trinidad-born Chinese diaspora dancer Dai Ailian, who played a leading role in the development of wartime dance in Chongqing and later went on to be a key figure in the PRC folk dance movement, toured her new dances in the United States (Wilcox 2019a).

With the establishment of the PRC in 1949, *yangge* emerged as a symbol of Chinese communist culture in overseas Chinese communities, and as such it also became a target of suppression for anti-communist governments seeking to limit the spread of leftist politics, which they often saw as a threat to colonial governance (Sutton 2014). In 1949, the *Malaya Tribune* published several articles about cultural developments in China in which it introduced *yangge* as a prominent feature of local life with strong communist associations (Roth 1949; Penn 1949; *Malaya Tribune* 8 November 1949). In January 1950, *yangge* made news in overseas Chinese communities when it was performed as a mode of public protest in a Hong Kong tram worker strike. The *Malaya Tribune* reported that strikers had performed *yangge* "in defiance" outside the trolley depot (*Malaya Tribune* 5 January 1950). Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* elaborated further, writing that strikers

[L]aughed and joked with each other, then broke out into *Yangko*, popular dance of the Chinese Communists. Up and down Russell Street the workers stamped in time to their singing (...) someone had got hold of a gaily painted drum, and another had a pair of cymbals and together they beat out the time at the head of the processive dance outside the place where they should have been working. (Freeman 1950)

In the spring of 1950, Chinese schools in Singapore were performing Chinese folk dances as part of their fundraising events. Yock Eng High School, located in Tanjong Katong, held a fortieth anniversary gala in May in which students performed *Tea-picking Dance* (*Caicha wu* 採茶舞), alongside other leftist items such as *Song of the Boatmen* (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 9 May 1950).

This increasing visibility of Chinese communist performance styles among overseas communities triggered a crackdown in the summer of 1950, which was following by a long period of attempts, often unsuccessful, to suppress *yangge* in the colonies. In June, both *The Singapore Free Press* and *The Straits Times* reported on new restrictions regarding "a Chinese book, published in Singapore, which describes the actions of a dance which has swept through Communist China – the 'Yangko'" (*The Singapore Free Press* 3 June 1950; *The Straits Times* 3 June 1950). The Singapore police took steps to limit public exposure to the dance, reportedly following similar actions to those in Hong Kong: "[P]ublic performances coming under Theatres Ordinance will not be permitted except under license issued by the police," explained *The Straits Times*. "This police action brings Singapore in line with that adopted by the Hong Kong Government last year when performances in public streets were banned" (*The Straits Times* 4 June 1950). Nevertheless, these police actions were not able to completely suppress the dance. As another *Straits Times* reporter revealed one week later:

Government officials whom I have interviewed in the course of the week, however, admit that it is most difficult to see how the Yangko, which has become a national dance for Red China recognized by the British Government, can be banned. They admit, too, that it is difficult to prevent the general public from seeing the dance, even though a ban on its public performance is enforced, for the dance can be held at concerts, variety shows and functions which do not

13. The WFYS held regular events dedicated to building solidarity among youth from colonised and formerly colonised countries. See, for example, World Federation of Democratic Youth 1957: 31-2; *Student Program for the Festival Moscow 1957*, in WFYSC, Binder 2.

14. "Highlights from the Programme," *Festival*, 5 August 1951, n.p. in WFYSC, Binder 9, Folder 3.

15. "De Toutes Les Iles de l'Indonésie" (From all the Indonesian Islands), *Festival*, 10 August 1955, in WFYSC, Binder marked "Fifth World Festival of Youth Warsaw 1955."

come under the Theatres Ordinance, and for which, therefore, police licenses are not required. No restrictions have so far been placed on the dance in certain Chinese schools. Because of the catchy tunes of some of the songs, the dance is growing in popularity among Chinese schoolchildren to whom it has been introduced, and hardly a week passes without a dance or two being given for associations or clubs by selected students. (Boon 1950)<sup>16</sup>

In Hong Kong, trade unions reportedly continued to perform *yangge* in public in the summer of 1950 despite the bans (*South China Morning Post* 19 June 1950).

By the mid-1950s, *yangge* and PRC folk dance remained widely popular among Chinese school students in Singapore and was also spreading to Malaya. In August 1955, following a June visit by Singapore Chinese high school students to the west coast of Malaya, *The Straits Times* reported, "Federation Chinese students are dancing the 'yangko', the forbidden Communist dance, and singing Chinese Communist songs." It went on, "The 'yangko' has become popular. It is danced in open spaces in Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang. The Singapore students coached certain 'leaders' in Federation Chinese schools in the art of defying authority" (*The Straits Times* 14 August 1955). That October, the Hin Hua High School in Klang (in Selangor, Malaysia) presented an anniversary show that featured the dance *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*, a photograph of which published in *Nanyang Siang Pau* closely resembles the PRC version.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the late 1950s, *yangge* continued to be a widely recognised symbol of the political influence of Chinese communist culture in British Southeast Asia. In 1956, following negotiations in Beijing over the citizenship of Singapore Chinese, Chief Minister David Marshall reportedly claimed to have "saved Singapore from a Yangko Merdeka," meaning a communist-led independence movement (*The Straight Times* 23 July 1956).<sup>18</sup> That same year, reporters referred to "Marshall's 'Yangko' opponents" as a political group (*Singapore Standard* 6 April 1956). In 1958, the performance of a "Farmer's Dance" thought to be a *yangge* during the visit of Ong Eng Guan's Singapore Mayoral Delegation to Penang sparked off a public controversy, which resulted in lengthy discussions in the news about *yangge's* form, meaning, and history (*Singapore Standard* 1 November 1958; *Singapore Standard* 31 January 1959; *The Straits Times* 27 February 1959; *Singapore Standard* 28 February 1959; *Singapore Standard* 1 April 1959; *The Straits Times* 1 April 1959; *South China Morning Post* 7 April 1959). A motion to censure D. S. Ramanathan, the George Town Mayor, for having allowed the performance was only narrowly defeated by one vote (*Singapore Standard* 8 November 1958). As late as 1958, *The Straits Times* reported that "today, the Chinese students in Malaya dance the Yangko simply because students in China do the same" (Lee 1958).

Historians of dance in Hong Kong and Singapore have documented that throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, community groups such as trade unions, clan associations, and Chinese schools continuously employed *yangge* and PRC folk dance as a medium of leftist political recruitment and activism, evading anti-communist policies that sought to suppress these dances and the communities who practiced them (Pee 1999; Kwok 2000; Chua 2014; Chua 2017; Wong and Lee 2019). How did overseas Chinese communities gain access to PRC dance during this period? From the early 1950s, the British press followed the United States in condemning WFYS, and colonial youth were strongly discouraged from taking part in these events (*The Singapore Free Press* 8 August 1951; *Singapore Standard* 14 August 1951; *Indian Daily Mail* 5 August 1953; *The Singapore Free Press* 22

March 1957; *The Straits Times* 26 March 1959; *The Straits Times* 12 April 1962; *Nanyang Siang Pau* 12 May 1962).<sup>19</sup> Thus, rather than gaining access to new PRC choreographies through the WFYS circuit, overseas Chinese communities had to rely on other avenues of circulation, such as artist visits and film. In 1956, a folk art ensemble from China performed in Macau and Hong Kong, introducing local audiences to new works such as *Red Silk Dance*, *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*, *Lotus Dance*, and *Lion Dance* (*Guangming ribao* 11 February 1956; *South China Morning Post* 26 June 1956; see also Kwok and Lee 2019). Sometime in 1956 or 1957, Hong Kong's leading leftist film studio, Great Wall Pictures Corporation, sent Ng Sai-fun 吳世勳, a dancer then employed as a teacher in the studio's song and dance troupe, to study choreography in Guangzhou with the South China Song and Dance Troupe (*Huanan gewutuan* 華南歌舞團) (Wong and Lee 2019: 28). The South China Song and Dance Troupe was led by Liang Lun, who had served as lead choreographer for Zhong Yi, the group that toured Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in 1946-48 (Liang 2011). While Ng was in Guangzhou, he learned the PRC method of creating staged folk dance – travelling to rural areas, conducting field research, and adapting folk material into concert choreography. After Ng returned to Hong Kong, he passed on his knowledge to students, who came from both Hong Kong and Singapore, and toured throughout the region (Wong and Lee 2019: 28-35).

Recent studies have shown that film served an important role in transmitting PRC culture across the so-called "Bamboo Curtain" during the Cold War (Xu 2017; Taylor 2018). Dance was one cultural practice that travelled with these films. In 1953, following the First All-China Folk Music and Dance Festival, Beijing's Central News Documentary Film Studio made *Folk Song and Dance* (*Minjian gewu* 民間歌舞), which recorded popular works from the festival, including *Running Donkey*, *Picking Tea Lantern* (*Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*), *Lion Dance*, and *Flower Drum Lantern* (*Dazhong dianying* 1953(19)). After it was circulated in China, *Folk Song and Dance* was shown in Japan in 1954 and Hong Kong in 1956, and it likely also reached Southeast Asia around the same time (*Guangming ribao* 17 October 1954; *South China Morning Post* 12 April 1956).<sup>20</sup> A second documentary dance film, Shanghai Film Studio's *Dances of the South* (*Nanfang zhi wu* 南方之舞), was shown widely in Singapore from 1960 until 1962.<sup>21</sup> Seemingly designed for the overseas market, *Dances of the South* included eight new choreographies developed from research on folk forms in Guangzhou and Hainan. It included styles popular in the diaspora such as *Lion Dance* (*Shizi wu* 獅子舞) and *Yingge wu* (英歌舞), as well as at least two works that had been featured at the 1955 WFYS in Warsaw (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 13 January 1960; see also Guangdong Province Dancers Association 2011). In addition to showing the dances themselves, the film depicted the process of learning from folk artists and transforming materials from the field to

16. See also "No Power to Stop Yangko," *Malaya Tribune*, 24 July 1950.

17. Photograph of Hin Hua High School students performing *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*. Published in *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 14 October 1955. Digitised Newspaper Collection, National Library Board, Singapore.

18. For another instance of Marshall citing the phrase "Yangko Merdeka," see *Singapore Standard*, 20 March 1956.

19. See also Sutton (2014). Despite pressures, nine delegates from Malaya apparently participated in the 1957 WFYS in Moscow. See World Federation of Democratic Youth, "The VI<sup>th</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship, Moscow July 28<sup>th</sup>-August 11<sup>th</sup> 1957," In Binder 2: 25-6.

20. *Nanyang Siang Pau* attributes the popularity of the song *Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*, which it reports as being widely broadcast and performed in Malaya, to a film by the name of *Chinese Folk Art* (*Zhongguo minjian yishu* 中國民間藝術), which may be this film. See *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 25 November 1956: 11.

21. *Nanyang Siang Pau* features regular advertisements for the film from 8 January 1960 to 17 May 1962, many indicating multiple showtimes each day and special prices for students.

the stage (*ibid.*). Using language from the *yangge* movement, one article described it as “filmed in a fresh and new manner, not only showing dance art but also the moving process of how artists go into life, go into the folk, excavate national art, and organise national art inheritance” (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 2 February 1960: 8). Popular choreographies from *Dances of the South* such as *Wedding* (*Qu xinniang* 娶新娘) were adapted from the film and performed locally (Figure 4) (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 11 February 1960: 8). Several of these dances also reportedly entered the repertoires of entertainment events held for Chinese schools and trade unions across the Federation of Malaya (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 9 October 1960: 7).

In her study of Chinese dance in San Francisco, Sau-ling Wong has shown



Figure 4. *Wedding* (*Qu xinniang* 娶新娘), from *Dances of the South*, performed by the South China Song and Dance Ensemble. Courtesy of the Guangdong Province Dancers Association.

that the link between folk dance and leftist politics, as well as the subsequent policing of these dance forms by anti-communist forces, extended even into diaspora communities in the United States. According to Wong, San Francisco’s Overseas Chinese Democratic Chinese Youth Group (*Huaqiao minzhu qingnian tuan* 華僑民主青年團, also known as *Minqing* or *Mun Ching*, a pro-Chinese Communist group) introduced PRC-style folk dances as part of its activities in the 1950s and had a lasting impact on the promotion of Chinese folk dance in the US (Wong 2010). However, this group was forced to disband after its members experienced debilitating FBI surveillance, threats of deportation, and persecution by local groups backed by the KMT. It was then replaced in 1959 by the Chinese Folk Dance Association, which used a focus on cultural performance to deflect political attacks (Lai 1976; Wong 2010).<sup>22</sup> As in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, dancers had limited direct access to PRC dance choreographies because of the ongoing Cold War. Thus, according to Wong, “Their first dance, *Caicha pudie* [*Picking Tea and Catching Butterflies*], was learned from a book accidentally found in a Chinatown bookstore” (2010: 3).

The Chinese Folk Dance Association maintained the political significance of folk dance in its local performances, in which it competed with groups promoting the Nationalist-led culture of Taiwan. Describing student performances when the group participated in at Stanford University, Wong writes, “In the case of the Stanford China Night shows, class can be mapped fairly easily onto the official ideologies of the two nation-states in question: ‘folk culture’ promoted by the pro-PRC crowd, ‘high culture’ by the pro-ROC crowd” (Wong 2010: 17).<sup>23</sup> Occasionally, these political tensions erupted in on-stage confrontation. As Wong recounts, “In one incident in San Jose in 1973, Nationalist sympathisers disrupted a performance of the song ‘Singing of the Motherland’ by unfurling a Nationalist flag and charging the stage” (2010: 4). Thus, rather than being separated from politics, performance became a venue for the Cold War to play out publicly, with folk dance often

serving as a galvanising force for leftist political groups.

## Conclusion

As an artistic campaign that emerged in China during the War of Resistance Against Japan in the late 1930s and early 1940s and reached its height during the Chinese Civil War of the late 1940s, the *yangge* movement was often thought to have run its political course by the early PRC years. In this essay, I have suggested that far from dying out, the *yangge* movement gained a new significance and relevance during the early PRC years, as it transitioned from a medium of domestic cultural politics to a site of Cold War cultural contestation on an international scale.

Through the newly created system of national dance festivals, dancers and choreographers in China transformed *yangge* into PRC folk dance, a repertoire of professionalised concert choreographies that took folk forms as their inspiration but were increasingly capable of attracting urban audiences and travelling internationally. In the context of the World Festivals of Youth and Students in Eastern Europe and the USSR, these new PRC folk dances emerged as a symbol of socialist China on the world stage, where they stood for leftist and anti-colonial cultural ideals such as the centring of rural culture, criticising imperialism, and using the arts to promote peace and international understanding. Although leftist culture was suppressed in the British colonies and United States during the Cold War, overseas Chinese communities in these places employed *yangge* and PRC folk dance as a way to advance their goals in the face of anti-communist suppression. In all three of these contexts – the PRC, the WFYS, and overseas Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the United States – Cold War *yangge* emerged as a site of cultural connectivity, political contestation, and transnational organising, expanding its impact as a potent symbol and resource for leftist activism worldwide.

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22. A similar strategy was used by the Hok Yau Dancing Club (*Xueyou Zhong-Xi wudao yanjiushe* 學友中西舞蹈研究社) in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. See Wong and Lee (2019: 119-71).  
23. In fact, Taiwan promoted its own version of Chinese folk dance, known as “*minzu wudao*” (民族舞蹈) during the 1950s and early 1960s. This dance style also grew out of the wartime dance movements on the mainland, but after 1949 it developed in Taiwan to express anti-communism. For more on this, see Chen (2008).

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